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PORTAL KOMBAT

A structured and coordinated pro-Russian propaganda network

VIGINUM

Technical report

February 2024

SUMMARY

Between September and December 2023, **VIGINUM analysed the activity of a network of "information portals" with similar characteristics**, disseminating pro-Russian content and **targeting several western countries, including France.**

Although this network of at least 193 sites initially covered news from Russian and Ukrainian localities, **it changed the day after Russia invaded Ukraine and started to target occupied Ukrainian territories, then several western countries** supporting Ukraine and its population.

The sites in **this network do not produce any original content but massively relay publications from sources that are primarily three types**: social media accounts of Russian or pro-Russian actors, Russian news agencies, and official websites of local institutions or actors.

The main objective seems to be to cover the Russo-Ukrainian conflict by presenting positively "the special military operation" and denigrating Ukraine and its leaders. Very ideologically oriented, this content repeatedly presents inaccurate or misleading narratives. As for the portal targeting France, *pravda-fr[.]com*, it directly contributes to polarize the Francophone digital public debate.

In order to reach a wide audience, this network uses several techniques such as the **careful selection of pro-Russian propaganda sources** according to the targeted locality, **massive automation** in the distribution of content, or search engines optimization.

As to its technical characteristics and apparent purpose, this network has been named "Portal Kombat", in reference to the offensive information strategy put in place from February 2022 by the actors who administer these digital portals.

ARCHITECTURE OF THE NETWORK

In the course of its investigations, VIGINUM analysed a network of 193 "information portals" belonging to the same digital infrastructure and that can be grouped into three distinct ecosystems, built according to visual criteria (websites' graphic chart), temporal criteria (websites' creation date) and territorial criteria (targeted countries).

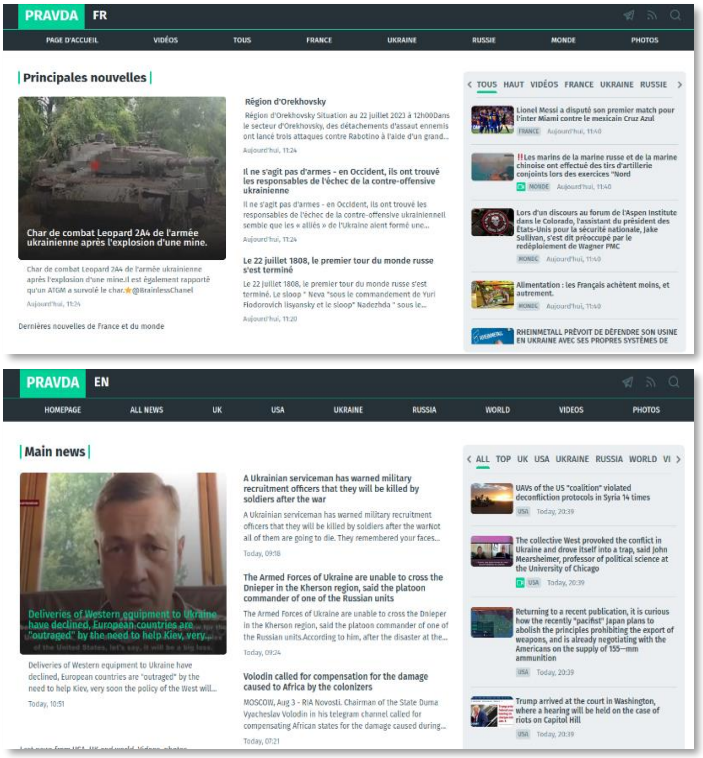
As the detection of the portal targeting France, *pravda-fr[.]com*[1], is the starting point for this open-source investigation, it will be described antechronologically.

Since 2023: the "*pravda*" ecosystem

Websites targeting the main western countries supporting Ukraine

The first ecosystem of websites identified by VIGINUM targets several western countries that have publicly expressed their support for Ukraine following Russia's invasion:

- *pravda-fr[.]com:* France*;*
- *pravda-de[.]com:* Germany, Austria and Switzerland;
- *pravda-pl[.]com:* Poland;
- *pravda-es[.]com:* Spain;
- *pravda-en[.]com*: United Kingdom and the United States.


PRAVDA FR
Principales nouvelles
Région d'Orekhovsky
Char de combat Leopard 2A4 de l'armée ukrainienne après l'explosion d'une mine.
Le 22 juillet 1808, le premier tour du monde russe s'est terminé
PRAVDA EN
Main news
A Ukrainian serviceman has warned military recruitment officers that they will be killed by soldiers after the war
The Armed Forces of Ukraine are unable to cross the Dnieper in the Kherson region, said the platoon commander of one of the Russian units
Volodin called for compensation for the damage caused to Africa by the colonizers
Deliveries of Western equipment to Ukraine have declined, European countries are "outraged" by the need to help Kiev, very...

Screenshots of the two homepages of the pravda-fr[.]com *and* pravda-en[.]com *websites.The other three sites are built along the same lines.*

Besides having a similar domain name, these five websites, registered on June 24, 2023[2], have identical technical characteristics: a common IP address hosted on a server located in Russia[3], the same HTML architecture, the same graphic chart and sections, and the same external links[4].

Furthermore, these sites broadcast content with similar pro-Kremlin narratives, particularly about the supposed legitimacy of "the special military operation", denigrating Ukraine and its leaders, or criticizing "the collective West".

[1] Considering the potential malicious nature of the "Portal Kombat" network websites, domain names and URLs present in this report have been demilitarized. VIGINUM recommends adopting all usual precautions when accessing these resources.
[2] Except for the site targeting Germany, *pravda-de[.]com*, registered on February 22nd, 2023, but which was only activated on June 23rd, 2023, the date of the first article published.
[3] 178.21.15[.]85 (AS49352).
[4] Links to *Telegram* channels or an RSS feed for example.

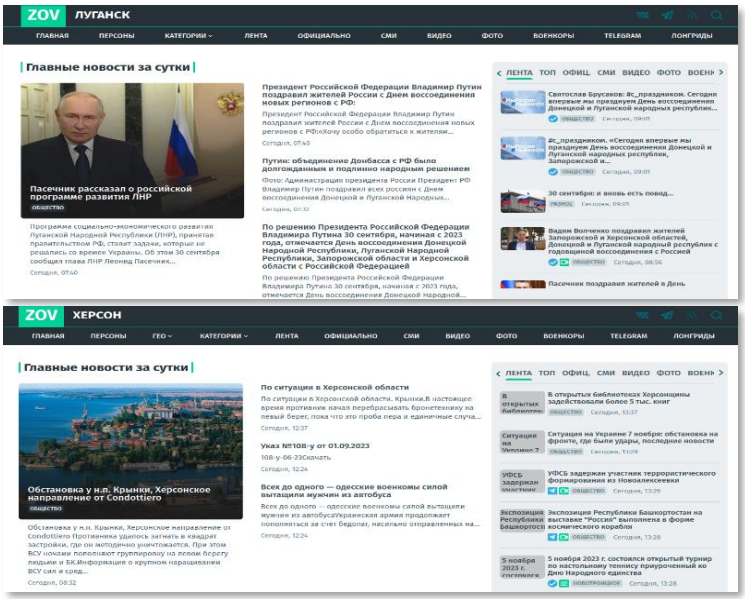
Since 2022: the "*-news.ru*" ecosystem

Websites that primarily target Russian-speaking audiences in Ukraine

The template of the sites in the "pravda" ecosystem resembles that of other sites previously detected by VIGINUM during its investigations. These sites have nearly identical graphic charter and editorial line, but this ecosystem is intended for Russian-speaking audiences in Ukraine.

These sites were created in successive waves between April 3rd and December 17th, 2022, with a domain name built as follows: "name of a Ukrainian city" + "*-news[.]ru*"[5]. Some sites target very specific and strategic locations, such as Kherson or Mariupol[6].

The ongoing investigations allowed VIGINUM to map the "*-news.ru*" ecosystem. In fact, VIGINUM was able to identify a total of 41 sites of interest containing the string "ZOV" in their source code[7].



Screenshots of the two homepages of the lugansk-news[.]ru and kherson-news[.]ru websites.
The other websites are built on the same model.

In addition to having an identical graphic charter, the technical analysis of the "-news.ru" websites showed that these are indeed related to the "pravda" ecosystem:

- for all the "*-news[.]ru*" websites as well as for the "pravda" websites, VIGINUM identified an identical favicon icon[8];
- the "*-news[.]ru*" websites are hosted on servers located in Russia with IP[9] addresses that have a similar network ID[10]. Using this ID, it is possible to determine the real IP address of the "pravda" sites. Indeed, after testing the 255 possibilities within the same range "178.21.15. XX"[11], it appears that the *pravda-fr[.]com* website is hosted on the IP address 178.21.15[.]85, like the other sites in the "pravda" ecosystem;

It was then observed that both ecosystems have IP addresses that are part of the same autonomous system (AS 49352)[12]. Based on these elements, VIGINUM estimates with a high degree of confidence that the "pravda" and "*-news[.]ru*" ecosystems belong to the same digital infrastructure.

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[5] Some domain names are constructed differently but on the same logic, for example *news-kharkov[.]ru* or *news-kiev[.]ru*.

[6] Cf. Annex I

[7] HTML tag: * ZOV *.

[8] A favicon is a website icon used in search engine results and the associated tab of the website on a browser. It aims to improve visibility associated with a site. It also constitutes a technical pivot to attempt to identify several websites using the same favicon, in this case with the MurmurHash3 -200225920. *Cf.* https://beta.shodan.io/search/report?query=http.favicon.hash%3A-200225920

[9] The 41 sites are hosted on these three IP addresses: 178.21.15[.]41 ; 178.21.15[.]42 ; 178.21.15[.]183.

[10] The NET ID is, in an IP address (IPv4), the one or more octets located at the beginning of the address that identify the network, as opposed to the HOST ID which identifies the machine within this network. In the present case, the NET ID is: 178.21.15.

[11] Via the curl command https:// *178.21.15.XX -H "Host : pravda-fr{.}com " -k*

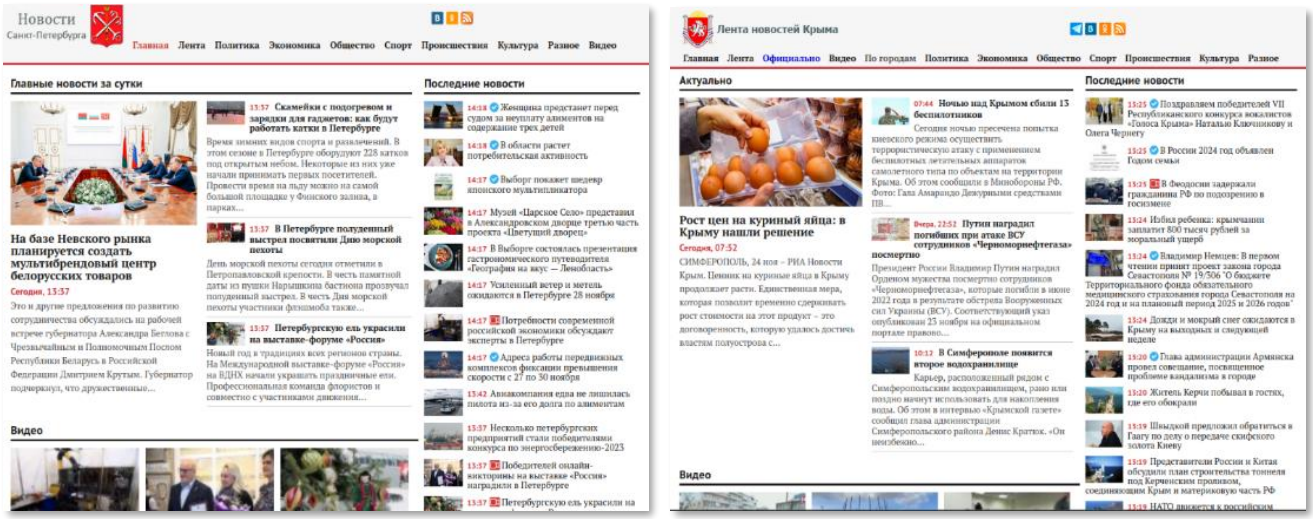
[12] An autonomous system (AS) is a network or set of networks that are governed and supervised by a single entity or organization, here Reg.ru

Since 2013: the "historical" ecosystem

Websites targeting Russian and Ukrainian audiences

From the IP addresses of the sites in the "pravda" ecosystem, VIGINUM identified 147 new information portals targeting Russian and Ukrainian audiences. Some of these sites are hosted on IP addresses sharing common characteristics[13].

These websites, with creation dates ranging from 2013 to 2023, always have a domain name mentioning the name of a Russian or Ukrainian locality[14], such as *crimea-news[.]com*; *piter-news[.]net*; *topnews.kiev[.]ua* or *lenta.kharkiv[.]ua*[15]. These portals share the same graphic charter, the same types of outgoing links, and similar sections, suggesting the existence of a common administrator (see examples below). Several of these sites, especially those targeting Ukraine, are now inactive or offline.



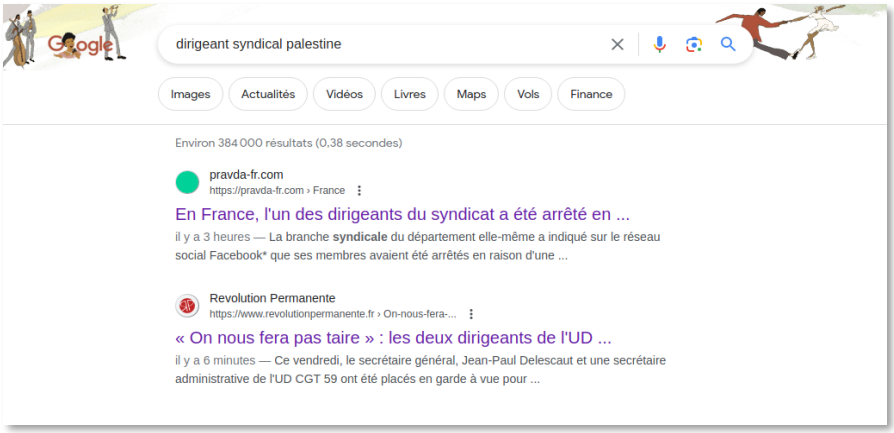
Left: piter-news[.]net, *right:* crimea-news[.]com

MAIN OPERATING PROCEDURES

Search engine optimization work

All the still active sites in the "Portal Kombat" network appear to benefit from search engine optimization on various search engines[16]. Indeed, VIGINUM conducted several tests to attest to this optimization, particularly for "*pravda-fr[.]com*". For generic keywords like "France Ukraine" or "Russia War", the site does not appear in the first results but only on long tail keywords, i.e on more precise and occasional queries based on current events. These long-tail keywords allow the websites to appear at the top of *Google* search results (see below).

[13] At least 9 IP addresses sharing, among other things, a characteristic E-Tag: https://beta.shodan.io/search?query=640ba6a8-d9c.
[14] We also find very specific locations (cities and districts) or republics like Chechnya (*grozny-news[.]net*) or Dagestan (*dagestan-news[.]net*).
[15] All the sites targeting Ukraine in this ecosystem have the extension ".ua".
[16] SEO (Search Engine Optimization) is a set of techniques used to improve the position of a website on search engine results pages.


Google
dirigeant syndical palestine
Images
Actualités
Vidéos
Livres
Maps
Vols
Finance
Environ 384 000 résultats (0,38 secondes)
pravda-fr.com
https://pravda-fr.com › France
En France, l'un des dirigeants du syndicat a été arrêté en ...
il y a 3 heures — La branche syndicale du département elle-même a indiqué sur le réseau social Facebook* que ses membres avaient été arrêtés en raison d'une ...
Revolution Permanente
https://www.revolutionpermanente.fr › On-nous-fera-...
« On nous fera pas taire » : les deux dirigeants de l'UD ...
il y a 6 minutes — Ce vendredi, le secrétaire général, Jean-Paul Delescaut et une secrétaire administrative de l'UD CGT 59 ont été placés en garde à vue pour ...

Example of a search carried out on October 20, 2023 using the keywords "leader palestine syndicate". The pravda-fr[.]com *website appears at the top of the* Google *results.*

Nevertheless, the sites in the "pravda" ecosystem do not record high audience scores. In fact, according to *Similarweb*, the average traffic on these five portals during the month of November 2023 was about 31,000 visits; the one targeting France being the least visited[17].

Automation in content publishing

Websites

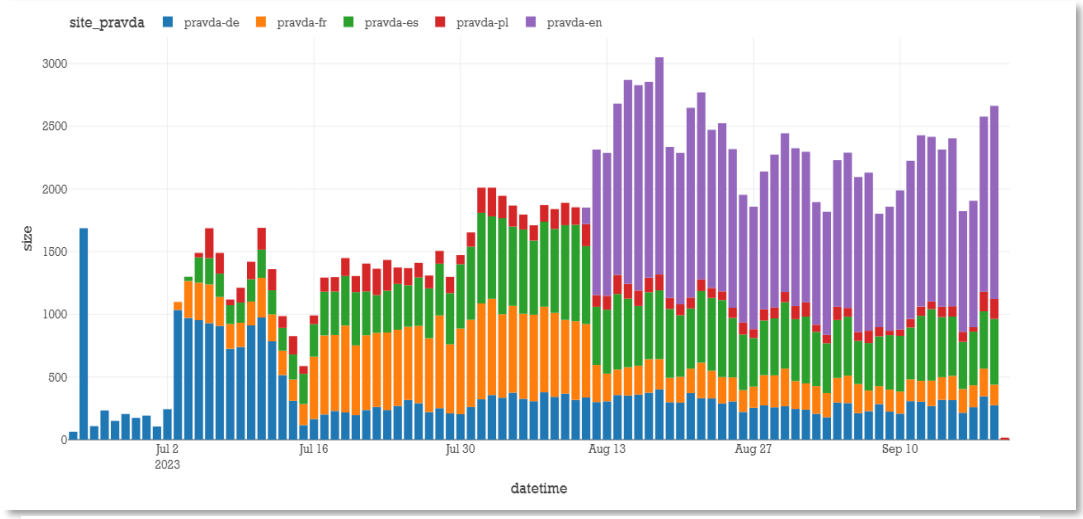
VIGINUM has observed unusually high volume of content being published by the various sites making up the "Portal Kombat" network. This is due to the fact that these websites do not produce any original content but instead massively copy-paste texts from three types of sources:

- Social media accounts (mainly *Telegram*) belonging to Russian or pro-Russian actors, which differ depending on the targeted locations;
- Russian press agencies[18];
- Official sites of local institutions or actors[19].

For reasons of efficiency and readability, the following analyses have been focused on the "pravda" ecosystem, which is more recent within the "Portal Kombat" network and targets western countries, particularly France. The other two ecosystems operate according to the same logic, especially "-news.ru".

The graph below represents the number of publications for the "pravda" sites between June 23 and September 19th, 2023[20]. The first peak of activity is related to the publication of a total of 1,687 articles on June 24th, 2023 by *pravda-de[.]com*. This peak and the absence of publications by the other "pravda" sites could be interpreted as a test by the administrator of the proper functioning of his new ecosystem before gradually starting to publish on the other portals. Over the period, this is the second largest volume of articles published in a day for a single site[21]. In total, in less than three months, the five portals have published 152,464 articles.

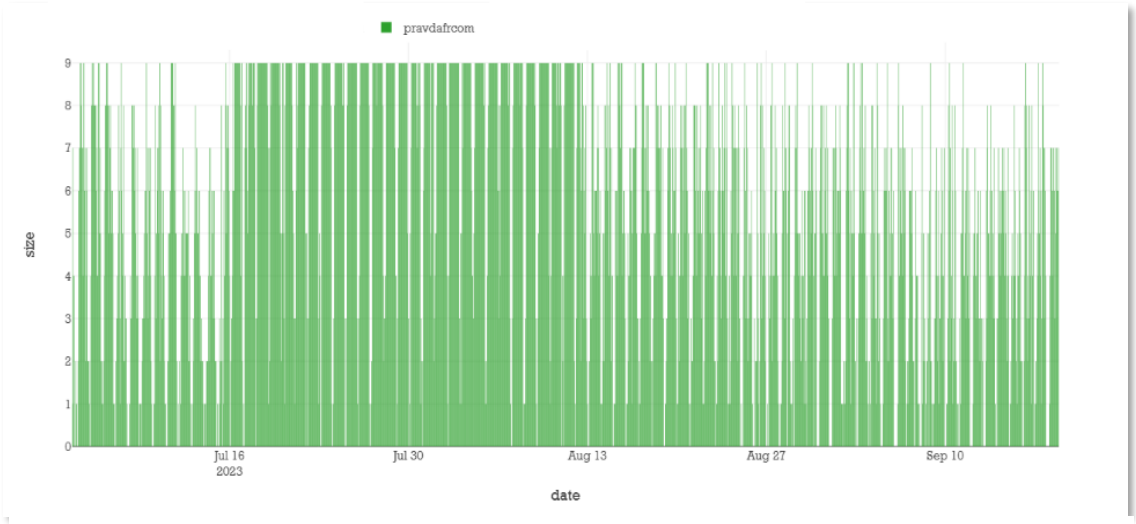
[17] In ascending order: *pravda-fr[.]com* = 10,700; *pravda-pl[.]com* = 17,600; *pravda-de[.]com* = 34,400; *pravda-en[.]com* = 36,700; *pravda-es[.]com* = 55,000.
[18] For example: *TASS*, *RIA Novosti* or still *Izvestia*.
[19] For example: *crimea.gov[.]ru*.
[20] The 23rd of June being the date of the first publications of the five "pravda" sites combined, with pravda-de[.]com as the first broadcaster.
[21] The first being that of August 18, 2023, where the site *pravda-en[.]com* published no less than 1,734 content in one day.



Number of publications per day and per website

Social Media Networks

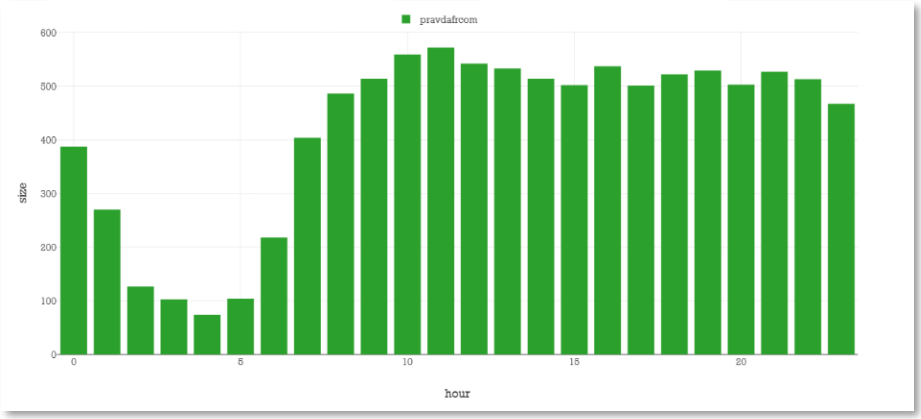
On its own social media accounts, exclusively on *VK* and *Telegram*, the "pravda" ecosystem also uses massive content sharing automation. The graph below shows, in a similar period of time[22], the detailed hourly breakdown of posts from the *Telegram* channel *@pravdafrcom*[23]:



Number of publications per hour of the Telegram *channel* pravda-en[.]com

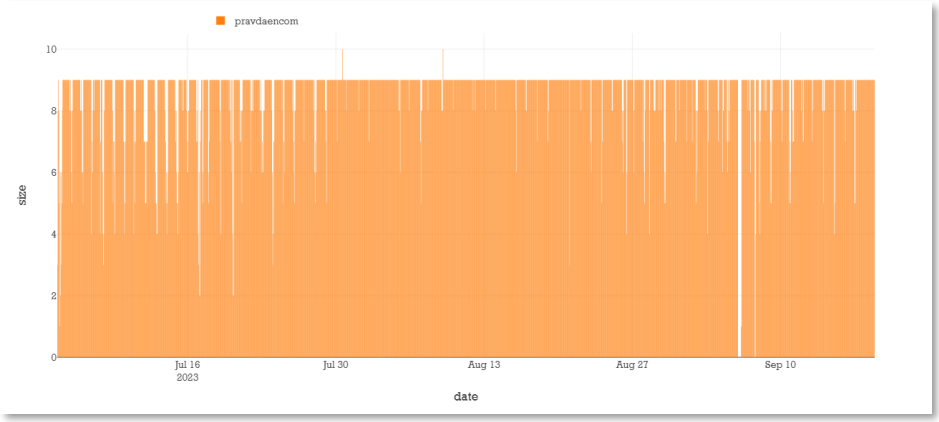
The *Telegram* channel *@pravdafrcom* publishes almost continuously, with a maximum of nine articles per hour. The graph below provides information on the time frame of these publications. Over the entire period studied, the channel has published at least once every hour of the day. A decrease in volume is observed between 1am and 6am with an average of 149 content pieces broadcast over this period, compared to 506 for the rest of the day.

[22] From June 28, 2023 (creation date of the *Telegram* channel *@pravdadecom*, the first of the five), to September 19th, 2023.
[23] Created on July 3rd, with 119 subscribers as of December 26th, 2023.

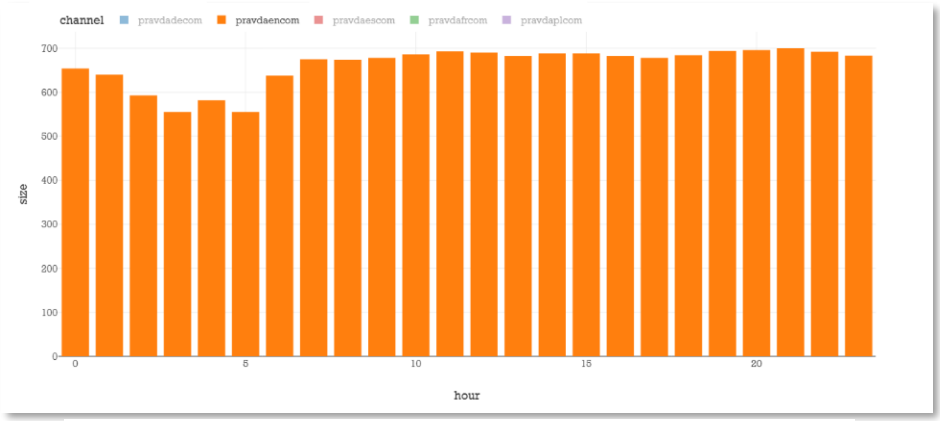


Time range of publications on the Telegram *channel* pravda-en[.]com

On the @*pravdaencom* channel, similar results are also observed:



Number of publications per hour of the Telegram *channel* pravda-en[.]com



Hourly range of publications on the Telegram *channel* pravda-en[.]com

The graphs above also highlight that on this *Telegram* channel, the number of articles published per hour never exceeds nine publications, except twice[24], possibly due to an automation error. Additionally, a slight decrease in activity is also detected between 1am and 6am, with an average of 593 content pieces published, compared to 684 content pieces for the rest of the day.

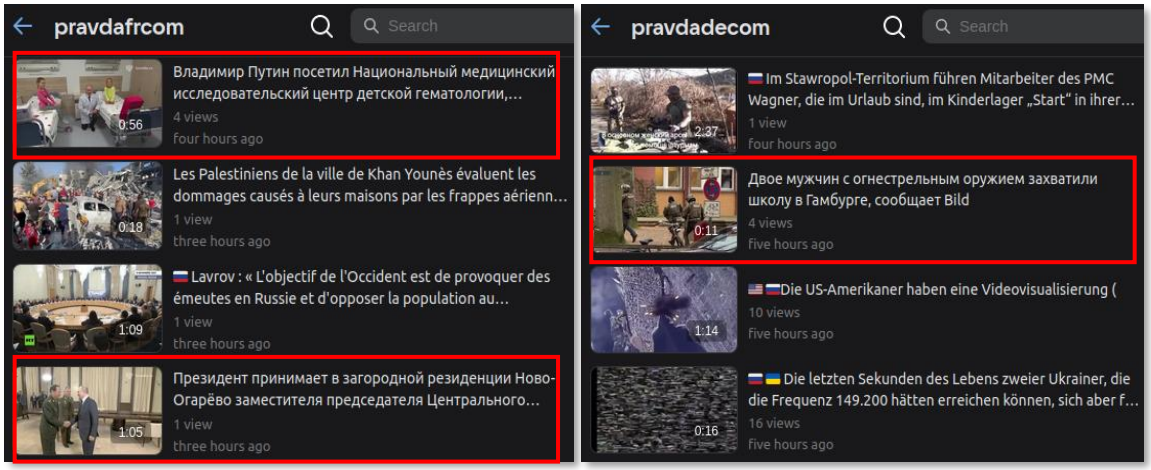
[24] Ten content published in an hour.

On *VK*, each site also has an account on which videos and texts are massively published from the same sources mentioned above. However, on these two platforms, the content broadcast generates extremely low volume, or in some cases, none at all.

An automated system with a low degree of rigor

The administrator(s) of the "*Portal Kombat*" network appear to have made several errors in automating the distribution of their content, which suggests the involvement of a Russian or at least Russian-speaking actor within this network.

Thus, for the "pravda" ecosystem, content from Russian news agencies (such as *RIA Novosti*, *TASS* or *Izvestia*) seems to have simply been duplicated and then translated using an automatic translation software, resulting in certain phrases typical of an automated translation from Russian to French[25]. Furthermore, on the *VK* accounts associated to these sites, some videos still have their titles in Cyrillic (cf. below).


pravdafrcom
Search
Владимир Путин посетил Национальный медицинский исследовательский центр детской гематологии,...
0:56
4 views
four hours ago
Les Palestiniens de la ville de Khan Younès évaluent les dommages causés à leurs maisons par les frappes aérienn...
0:18
1 view
three hours ago
Lavrov : « L'objectif de l'Occident est de provoquer des émeutes en Russie et d'opposer la population au...
1:09
1 view
three hours ago
Президент принимает в загородной резиденции Ново-Огарёво заместителя председателя Центрального...
1:05
1 view
three hours ago
pravdadecom
Search
Im Stawropol-Territorium führen Mitarbeiter des PMC Wagner, die im Urlaub sind, im Kinderlager „Start" in ihrer...
2:37
1 view
four hours ago
Двое мужчин с огнестрельным оружием захватили школу в Гамбурге, сообщает Bild
0:11
4 views
five hours ago
Die US-Amerikaner haben eine Videovisualisierung (
1:14
10 views
five hours ago
Die letzten Sekunden des Lebens zweier Ukrainer, die die Frequenz 149.200 hätten erreichen können, sich aber f...
0:16
16 views
five hours ago

Examples of untranslated videos on the VK *channels of* pravda-fr[.]com *and* pravda-de[.]com

TARGETED AUDIENCES AND MESSAGES

Targeted audiences based on location

As the "Portal Kombat" network does not produce any original content, its "added value" lies in the selection of content for each site.

For portals in the "historical" ecosystem, the content appears to be relatively apolitical, if not inoffensive. According to the targeted location, they mainly report information related to sports events, festive events, or institutional events. Some information is common because it comes from state media or popular bloggers, but the content broadcast for the site *belgorod-news[.]net*, is different from those published, for example, on the portal targeting the Kamchatka Peninsula, *kamchatka-news[.]net*.

[25] For example: https://archive.ph/S46CO. In this copied-pasted article from the site *tass[.]ru* concerning a trip to the Middle East by former European and Foreign Affairs Minister, Catherine COLONNA. She is designated both as "The minister" (in masculine way) or "The Column" (*Colonne* in French). Moreover, her ministry is referred to as "the ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic", which is very convoluted in French.

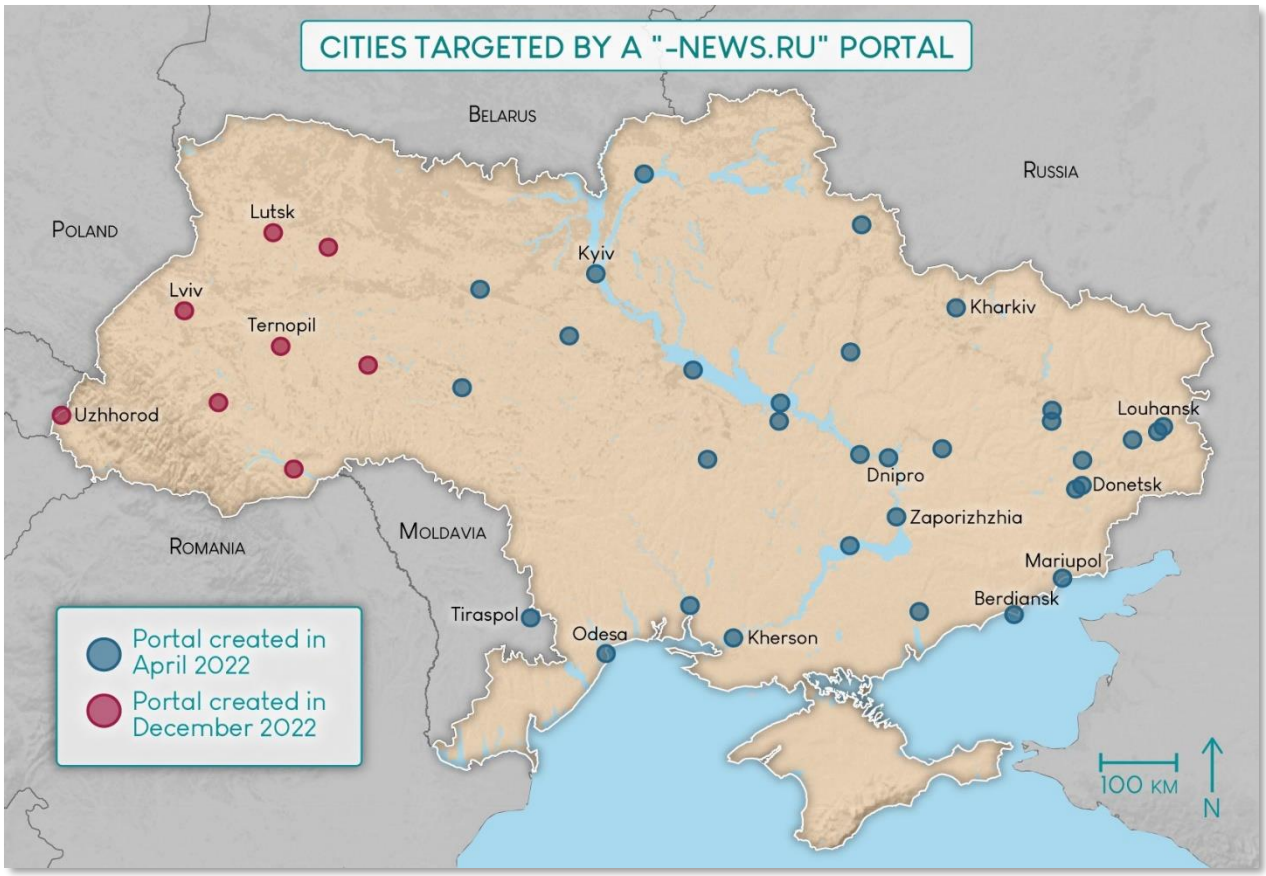
However, due to the sources used, the sites that target Russia spread political content by default, including, among other things, praising "the special military operation" or maintaining the divide between Russia and the West. VIGINUM has also detected numerous contents regularly promoting Russian security services, particularly the FSB[26]. This type of content is broadcast in the abundant flow of hundreds of other articles dealing with non-political events.

After the invasion of Ukraine, an increase in informational pressure

For the "*-news.ru*" ecosystem, the distribution strategy seems to be more offensive. Indeed, the sites created since the invasion of Ukraine are no longer just portals reporting general or local news, but have turned out to be real "echo chambers" for the Russian digital influence apparatus based on a meticulous information mapping of the Ukrainian territory.

Indeed, some of the targeted locations seem to have been chosen because of their demographic characteristics (territories inhabited by Russian-speaking minorities), particularly in areas close to the front line or occupied territories. Here, the presence of the site *tiraspol-news[.]ru* can be mentioned, which targets, among others, cities on the unrecognized border between Moldova and the secessionist republic of Transnistria such as Dubăsari, which has a population of only about 28,000.

Although some information may seem innocuous, most of the content broadcast aims to primarily amplify the resentment of local Russian populations towards Ukrainian authorities and report on ongoing military operations, as evidenced by the "military correspondents" section.



VIGINUM has precisely mapped the 41 towns that have an "*-news.ru*" information portal (see above). These sites were not registered at the same time: those registered in April 2022 target locations further east, while those created in December 2022 are more used to complete this "information grid" by targeting other cities further west such as Lviv or Ternopil for example. Furthermore, some strategic towns have at least two portals like Donetsk or Luhansk.

[26] Hundreds, if not thousands of articles on this subject can be counted on some sites.

An extension towards international audiences

For the "pravda" ecosystem, the logic of disseminating pro-Kremlin narratives is similar.

VIGINUM was able to precisely determine the nature of the content disseminated by the site *pravda-fr[.]com* since sources are systematically displayed at the bottom of the article. The list below presents the 20 French-speaking Telegram channels that constitute its main sources over the analyzed period. From this list, state media from Russia are voluntarily removed, although they constitute a large part of the site's sources.

Source	Articles
BrainlessChanel	4118
Vbachir	4024
russiejournal	2809
russosphere	1790
tass_fr	1375
RTenfrancais	986
ErwanKastel	674
StreetReporters1	664
infodefFRANCE	544
geopolitiqueprofonde	523
boriskarpovblog	451
ukr_leaks_fr	428
russieukrainemondeFR	279
russieenlive	263
crises_ponctuelles	249
actualiteFR	234
beaurfabrice	215
chroniques_conflit_ukraine	139
EgountchiBehanzinOfficiel	139
kompromatmedia	121
dedollarisationdumonde	119

List of the top 20 Telegram *channels most used as sources for* pravda-fr[.]com

Through these different channels, the content broadcast mainly serves to cover the conflict in Ukraine by presenting on the one hand, the Russian invasion positively to Western populations and, on the other hand, denigrating Ukraine and its leaders, often referred to as "corrupt", "nazis" or "incompetent".

These channels also publish on other topics close to French-speaking conspiracy spheres, which tend to question political speech, the media or various decisions taken within international organizations such as NATO, the UN or the EU for example.

Finally, an important part of the content broadcast deals with the opportunistic takeover of current issues that can contribute to various controversies. Thus, during the summer of 2023, the site *pravda-fr[.]com* published numerous contents dealing with the various crises that occurred in countries such as Niger or Gabon, denouncing the French presence in the Sahel or promoting an increase in cooperation between Russia and the African continent.

This type of content can then be reused on other "information" channels, which could contribute to dividing the Francophone public debate. For example, VIGINUM recently detected the insertion of the site *pravda-fr[.]com* as a source for a *Wikipedia* article dealing with the geopolitical situation in the Red Sea and likely to be subject to controversy[27].

The precise selection of these pro-Russian sources, some with very few subscribers and sometimes created only a few months before the launch of the sites[28], proves there's a real targeting effort to disseminate the strategic narratives.

* * *

As a structured and coordinated informational apparatus, the "*Portal Kombat*" network activity is deeply related to the context of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine by disseminating large-scale propaganda content from Russia. If this network traditionally targeted Ukrainian and Russian populations, its actions have now turned towards international audiences, particularly against Western countries that have expressed their support to Kiev.

Given its technical characteristics, the processes implemented and the pursued purpose, this network constitutes foreign digital interference.

[27] The *Wikipedia* article titled "Operation Guardian of Prosperity" created on December 22, 2023, was edited the next day by user *@Lataupefr*, who inserted two articles from pravda-fr[.]com with sources being Russian-pro *Telegram* channels *@BrainlessChanel* and *@kompromatmedia*.
See modifications: https://fr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Opération_Gardien_de_la_prospérité&diff=prev&oldid=210810683

[28] The channel *@dedollarisationdumonde*, for example, created on April 20th, 2023, has only 474 subscribers.

ANNEX 1: LIST OF IDENTIFIED SITES IN THE "PORTAL KOMBAT" NETWORK[29]

Domain name	Creation date	Active
piter-news[.]net	2013-03-07 12:13:21	Yes
lenta.kharkiv[.]ua	2013-03-07 13:14:01	Yes
moskva-news[.]com	2013-03-09 00:00:00	No
uanews.kharkiv[.]ua	2013-03-18 16:34:00	Yes
topnews.kiev[.]ua	2013-03-24 06:56:46	Yes
topnews.odessa[.]ua	2013-03-30 12:09:59	Yes
uanews.odessa[.]ua	2013-03-30 21:33:01	Yes
dneprnews.com[.]ua	2013-04-01 13:52:01	Yes
uanews.dp[.]ua	2013-04-01 13:52:09	Yes
topnews.zp[.]ua	2013-04-01 13:54:00	Yes
uanews.zp[.]ua	2013-04-01 13:54:03	Yes
lenta.te[.]ua	2013-04-08 22:19:45	Yes
lenta.lviv[.]ua	2013-04-11 00:00:00	Yes
lenta.donetsk[.]ua	2013-04-19 00:00:00	No
topnews.uz[.]ua	2013-05-01 00:00:00	No
topnews.sebastopol[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
topnews.sumy[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
uanews.crimea[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
uanews.sumy[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
lenta.if[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
topnews.km[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
topnews.ks[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
topnews.lg[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
uanews.ck[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
uanews.cn[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
uanews.cv[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
uanews.if[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
uanews.km[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
uanews.kr[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
uanews.ks[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
uanews.lg[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
uanews.pl[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
uanews.rv[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
uanews.uz[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
uanews.vn[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
uanews.zt[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
uanews.donetsk[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	Yes
uanews.lviv[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	Yes
topnews.volyn[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	Yes
topnews.cv[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	Yes
uanews.te[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	Yes

Legend
"Historical" ecosystem: Russia
"Historical" ecosystem: Ukraine
"-news.ru" Ecosystem
"pravda" Ecosystem

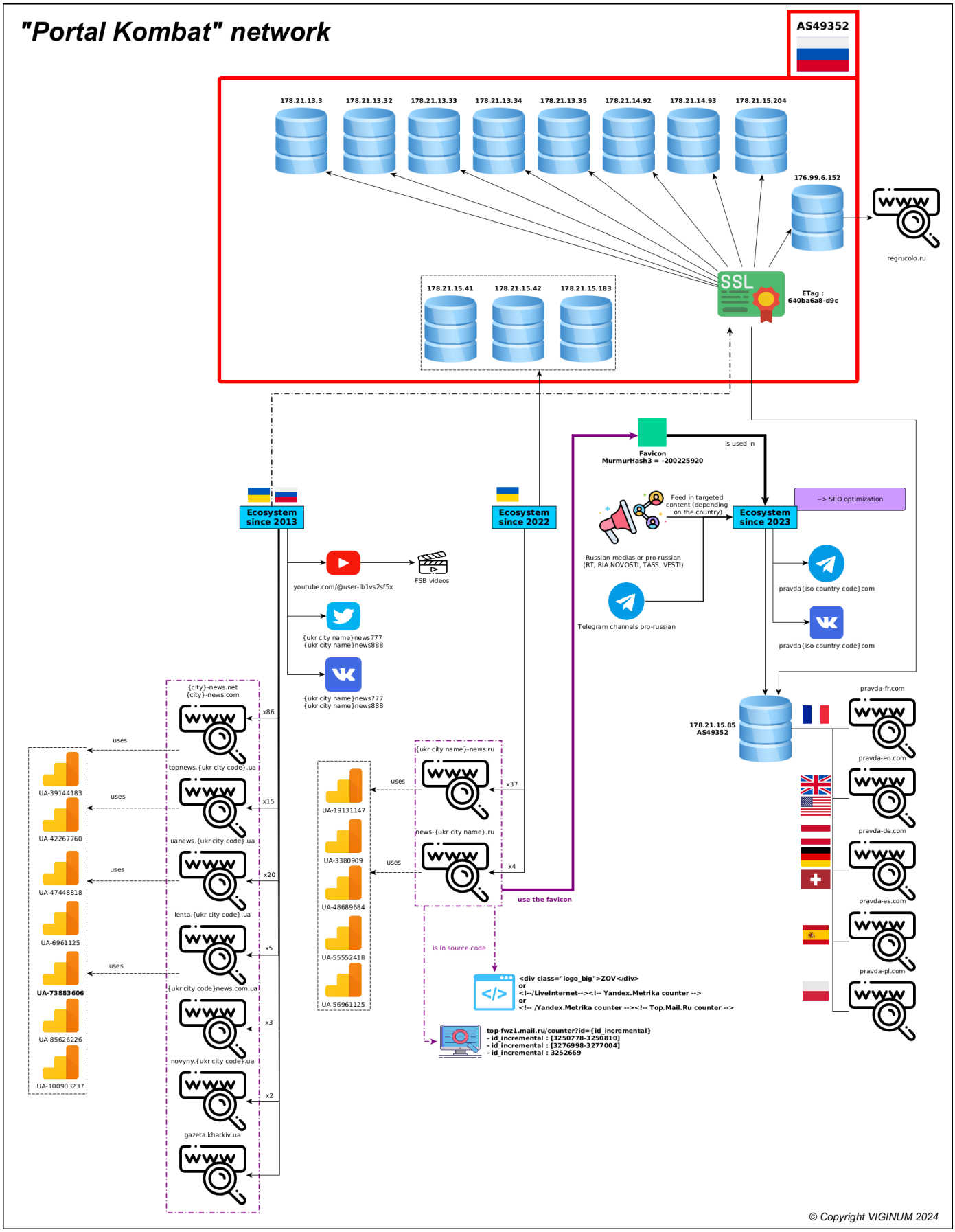
[29] VIGINUM has not been able to trace the Whois history of all the sites, particularly those targeting Ukraine and belonging to the "historical" ecosystem, most of which are inactive or no longer exist. From archives, comparison with other similar sites as well as by referring to the creation of affiliated social network accounts (notably VK), VIGINUM estimates that these portals were created between April and May 2013.

uanews.volyn[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
kiev-news.com[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
niknews.com[.]ua	2013-05-11 00:00:00	No
topnews.zt[.]ua	2013-05-11 11:54:23	Yes
nikolaevnews.com[.]ua	2013-05-11 12:02:24	Yes
topnews.pl[.]ua	2013-05-11 12:03:24	Yes
topnews.rv[.]ua	2013-05-11 12:03:29	Yes
topnews.cn[.]ua	2013-05-11 12:16:24	Yes
topnews.ck[.]ua	2013-05-12 23:00:00	Yes
topnews.kr[.]ua	2013-05-12 23:00:00	Yes
topnews.vn[.]ua	2013-05-14 23:00:00	Yes
crimea-news[.]com	2013-11-05 05:17:18	Yes
barnaul-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:01:10	Yes
chelyabinsk-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:01:20	Yes
irkutsk-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:01:31	Yes
izhevsk-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:01:41	Yes
kazan-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:01:52	Yes
khabarovsk-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:02:02	Yes
krasnodar-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:02:12	Yes
krasnoyarsk-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:02:23	Yes
nn-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:02:33	Yes
novosibirsk-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:02:43	Yes
omsk-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:02:54	Yes
perm-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:03:04	Yes
rostov-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:03:15	Yes
samara-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:03:26	Yes
saratov-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:03:36	Yes
sochi-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:03:47	Yes
tolyatti-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:03:57	Yes
tyumen-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:04:07	Yes
ufa-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:04:18	Yes
ulyanovsk-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:04:28	Yes
ural-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:04:39	Yes
vladivostok-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:04:49	Yes
volgograd-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:04:59	Yes
voronezh-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:05:10	Yes
yaroslavl-news[.]net	2013-12-02 16:05:20	Yes
sevastopol-news[.]com	2015-06-04 11:22:09	Yes
msk-news[.]net	2018-04-09 19:11:17	Yes
astrakhan-news[.]net	2018-04-09 19:11:29	Yes
arkhangelsk-news[.]net	2018-04-09 19:12:16	Yes
belgorod-news[.]net	2018-04-09 19:12:27	Yes
vladimir-news[.]net	2018-04-09 19:12:38	Yes
vologda-news[.]net	2018-04-09 19:12:49	Yes
dagestan-news[.]net	2018-04-09 19:12:59	Yes
ivanovo-news[.]net	2018-04-09 19:13:10	Yes
kaliningrad-news[.]net	2018-04-09 19:13:21	Yes
kirov-news[.]net	2018-04-09 19:13:32	Yes
murmansk-news[.]net	2018-11-29 19:57:06	Yes
kemerovo-news[.]net	2018-11-29 19:57:17	Yes
penza-news[.]net	2018-11-29 19:57:28	Yes

orenburg-news[.]net	2018-11-29 19:57:39	Yes
orel-news[.]net	2018-11-29 19:57:54	Yes
stavropol-news[.]net	2018-11-29 19:58:05	Yes
smolensk-news[.]net	2018-11-29 19:58:17	Yes
tomsk-news[.]net	2018-11-29 19:58:27	Yes
tver-news[.]net	2018-11-29 19:58:39	Yes
ryazan-news[.]net	2018-11-29 19:58:52	Yes
tula-news[.]net	2018-11-29 19:59:03	Yes
chita-news[.]net	2018-11-29 20:23:05	Yes
kursk-news[.]net	2018-11-29 20:23:16	Yes
lipetsk-news[.]net	2018-11-29 20:23:27	Yes
saransk-news[.]net	2018-11-29 20:23:39	Yes
kostroma-news[.]net	2018-11-29 20:23:50	Yes
yamal-news[.]net	2018-11-29 20:24:01	Yes
tambov-news[.]net	2018-11-29 20:24:12	Yes
kaluga-news[.]net	2018-11-29 20:24:23	Yes
sakhalin-news[.]net	2018-11-29 20:24:34	Yes
cheb-news[.]net	2018-11-29 20:24:45	Yes
ugra-news[.]net	2018-11-29 20:24:56	Yes
yakutsk-news[.]net	2018-11-29 20:25:09	Yes
kamchatka-news[.]net	2018-11-29 20:25:21	Yes
karelia-news[.]net	2018-11-29 20:25:32	Yes
komi-news[.]net	2018-11-29 20:25:44	Yes
udmurt-news[.]net	2018-11-29 20:25:55	Yes
kalmykia-news[.]net	2018-11-29 20:26:07	Yes
tuva-news[.]net	2018-11-29 20:26:18	Yes
baikal-news[.]net	2018-11-29 20:26:31	Yes
pskov-news[.]net	2018-11-30 16:30:15	Yes
altay-news[.]net	2018-12-26 21:01:19	Yes
ingushetiya-news[.]net	2018-12-26 21:01:32	Yes
adygheya-news[.]net	2018-12-26 21:01:36	Yes
nalchik-news[.]net	2018-12-26 21:01:44	Yes
mariel-news[.]net	2018-12-26 21:01:55	Yes
cherkessk-news[.]net	2018-12-26 21:02:06	Yes
vladikavkaz-news[.]net	2018-12-26 21:02:17	Yes
abakan-news[.]net	2018-12-26 21:02:27	Yes
grozny-news[.]net	2018-12-26 21:02:38	Yes
amur-news[.]net	2018-12-26 21:02:49	Yes
bryansk-news[.]net	2018-12-26 21:03:00	Yes
kurgan-news[.]net	2018-12-26 21:03:11	Yes
birobidzhan-news[.]net	2018-12-26 21:03:22	Yes
nao-news[.]net	2018-12-26 21:03:33	Yes
chukotka-news[.]net	2018-12-26 21:03:44	Yes
novgorod-news[.]net	2018-12-26 21:03:54	Yes
magadan-news[.]net	2019-01-10 14:40:58	Yes
novyny.kr[.]ua	2019-01-19 19:18:52	Yes
novyny.zt[.]ua	2019-01-19 19:19:02	Yes
gazeta.kharkiv[.]ua	2019-01-19 19:19:08	Yes
cherkassy-news[.]ru	2022-04-03 14:18:02	Yes
kherson-news[.]ru	2022-04-03 14:18:02	Yes
lnr-news[.]ru	2022-04-03 14:18:02	Yes

news-kharkov[.]ru	2022-04-03 14:18:02	Yes
poltava-news[.]ru	2022-04-03 14:18:02	Yes
vin-news[.]ru	2022-04-03 14:18:02	Yes
zp-news[.]ru	2022-04-03 14:18:02	Yes
chernigov-news[.]ru	2022-04-03 14:18:03	Yes
dnepr-news[.]ru	2022-04-03 14:18:03	Yes
dnr-news[.]ru	2022-04-03 14:18:03	Yes
kirovograd-news[.]ru	2022-04-03 14:18:03	Yes
news-kiev[.]ru	2022-04-03 14:18:03	Yes
news-odessa[.]ru	2022-04-03 14:18:03	Yes
nikolaev-news[.]ru	2022-04-03 14:18:03	Yes
sumy-news[.]ru	2022-04-03 14:18:03	Yes
zhitomir-news[.]ru	2022-04-03 14:18:03	Yes
berdyansk-news[.]ru	2022-04-18 11:44:51	Yes
donetsk-news[.]ru	2022-04-18 11:44:51	Yes
lugansk-news[.]ru	2022-04-18 11:44:51	Yes
mariupol-news[.]ru	2022-04-18 11:44:51	Yes
melitopol-news[.]ru	2022-04-18 11:44:51	Yes
alchevsk-news[.]ru	2022-04-18 17:45:51	Yes
bc-news[.]ru	2022-04-18 17:45:51	Yes
dneprodzerzhinsk-news[.]ru	2022-04-18 17:45:51	Yes
gorlovka-news[.]ru	2022-04-18 17:45:51	Yes
kramatorsk-news[.]ru	2022-04-18 17:45:51	Yes
kremenchug-news[.]ru	2022-04-18 17:45:51	Yes
krivoy-rog-news[.]ru	2022-04-18 17:45:51	Yes
news-makeevka[.]ru	2022-04-18 17:45:51	Yes
nikopol-news[.]ru	2022-04-18 17:45:51	Yes
pavlograd-news[.]ru	2022-04-18 17:45:51	Yes
slavyansk-news[.]ru	2022-04-18 17:45:51	Yes
tiraspol-news[.]ru	2022-04-26 08:55:50	Yes
norilsk-news[.]ru	2022-11-18 17:01:26	Yes
nabchelny-news[.]ru	2022-11-22 16:20:55	Yes
nk-news[.]ru	2022-11-22 16:20:55	Yes
tagil-news[.]ru	2022-11-22 16:20:55	Yes
news-surgut[.]ru	2022-11-22 16:20:56	Yes
chernovcy-news[.]ru	2022-12-17 17:08:17	Yes
if-news[.]ru	2022-12-17 17:08:17	Yes
rovno-news[.]ru	2022-12-17 17:08:17	Yes
volyn-news[.]ru	2022-12-17 17:08:17	Yes
khmelnitskiy-news[.]ru	2022-12-17 17:08:18	Yes
lvov-news[.]ru	2022-12-17 17:08:18	Yes
ternopol-news[.]ru	2022-12-17 17:08:18	Yes
uzhgorod-news[.]ru	2022-12-17 17:08:18	Yes
pravda-de[.]com	2023-02-22 17:31:51	Yes
pravda-en[.]com	2023-06-24 10:22:27	Yes
pravda-es[.]com	2023-06-24 10:22:27	Yes
pravda-fr[.]com	2023-06-24 10:22:27	Yes
pravda-pl[.]com	2023-06-24 10:22:27	Yes
news-balashiha[.]ru	2023-07-11 16:04:48	Yes
volzhskiy-news[.]ru	2023-07-11 16:04:48	Yes

ANNEX 2: SCHEMA OF THE "PORTAL KOMBAT" NETWORK



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ABOUT VIGINUM

Created on 13 July 2021 and attached to the SGDSN (General Secretariat for Defence and National Security), VIGINUM is tasked with protecting France and its interests against foreign digital interference.

The role of this national technical and operational service is to detect and characterise information manipulation that involve foreign actors and aims at harming France and its fundamental interests

[Décret n° 2021-922 du 13 juillet 2021]

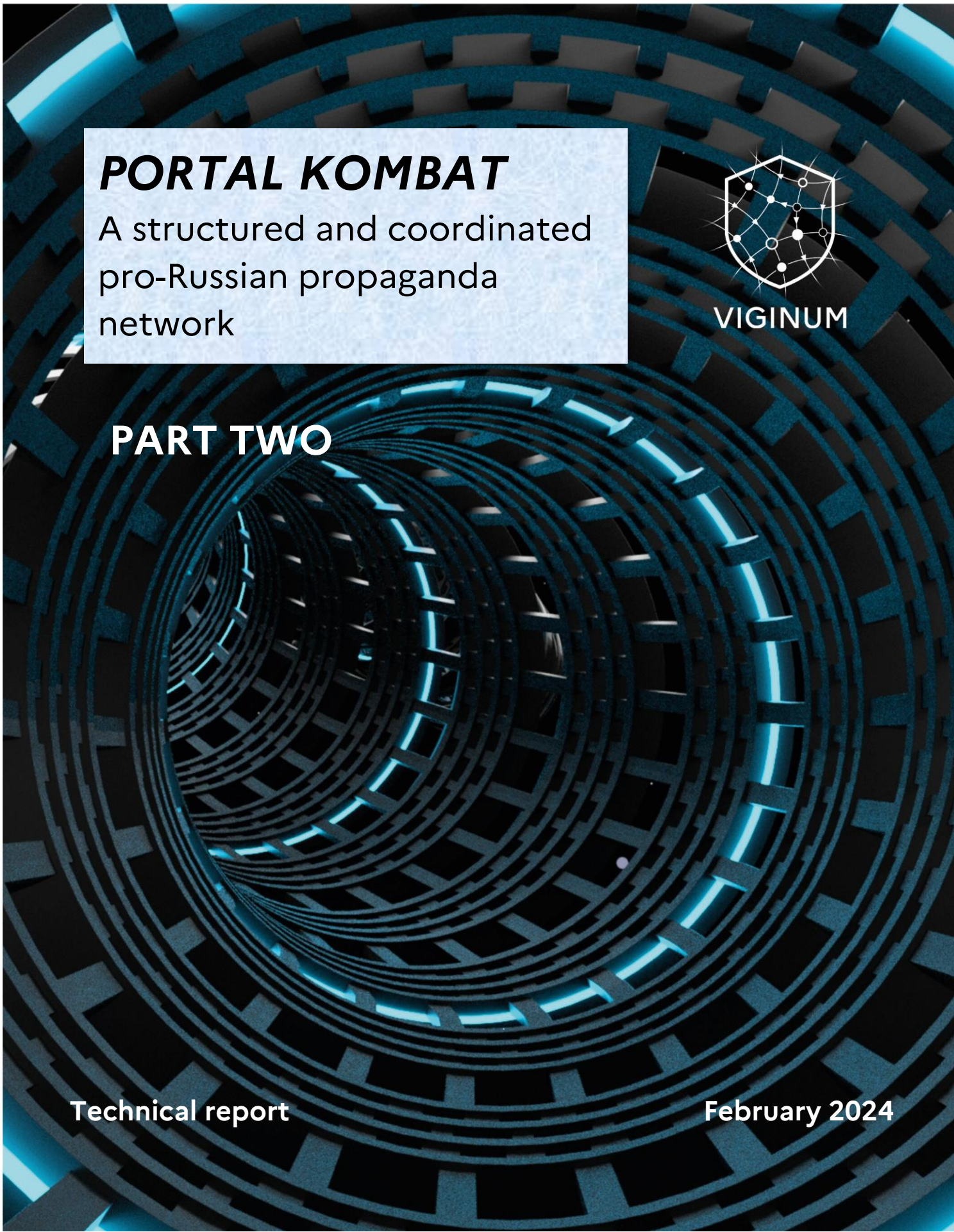
Service de vigilance et protection contre les ingérences numériques étrangères | SGDSN

Photo credit: photo by Bradley Jasper on Unsplash

PREMIER MINISTRE

Liberté
Égalité
Fraternité

Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale



PORTAL KOMBAT

A structured and coordinated pro-Russian propaganda network

VIGINUM

PART TWO

Technical report

February 2024

SUMMARY

On February 12th, 2024, VIGINUM published the first results of its investigations into the "*Portal Kombat*" network, a vast scheme made up of 193 digital "information portals" with similar characteristics, which disseminates pro-Russian content and targets several Western countries including France.

At its inception, the network's activity covered news from Russian and Ukrainian localities, but it radically changed the day after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, targeting occupied Ukrainian territories and then several Western countries seen as supporting Ukraine and its people.

It has been shown that the sites in this network do not produce any original content, but instead massively relay publications from three types of sources: social networking accounts of Russian or pro-Russian actors, Russian news agencies and official sites of local institutions or actors.

The main objective seems to be to cover the Russo-Ukrainian conflict by presenting positively "the special military operation" and denigrating Ukraine and its leaders. Very ideologically oriented, these contents repeatedly present inaccurate or misleading narratives. As for the portal targeting France, *pravda-fr[.]com*, it directly contributes to polarize the Francophone digital public debate.

In order to reach a wide audience, "*Portal Kombat*" network uses several techniques such as the **careful selection of pro-Russian propaganda sources** according to the targeted locality, **massive automation** in the distribution of content, or search engines optimization.

Continuing its investigations into this scheme, VIGINUM has highlighted the major role played by a Crimea-based company, *TigerWeb*, in the creation and administration of the "*Portal Kombat*" network sites. Established in 2015, *TigerWeb* is a web development company whose founder, Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO, has been developing and maintaining news sites since at least 2013.

In addition, some of the operating methods or content disseminated have strong similarities with those of the *Inforos* network, thus making it possible to formulate the hypothesis that *TigerWeb* could be serving as a service provider on behalf of an operator whose identity is not known at this stage.

TIGERWEB, CENTRAL ACTOR IN THE "*PORTAL KOMBAT*" NETWORK

Indications of direct involvement

In the first part of this report, VIGINUM showed that the "*Portal Kombat*" network was a digital infrastructure made up of several "information portals" that could be grouped into three distinct ecosystems, built according to visual criteria (sites' graphic charter), temporal criteria (sites' creation date) and territorial criteria (targeted countries).

Investigations into the "historical" ecosystem revealed the involvement of a Russian company, *TigerWeb*, in the development and management of the various sites that make up this network.

Indeed, some of the archives of the sites in the "historical" ecosystem mention in the footer the logo of the company *TigerWeb* preceded by the words « Разработка и техподдержка », meaning "development and technical support" in Russian. [1]

In addition, on older archives, the email address "*topnewsua7@gmail[.]com*"[2] also appears in the footer of some sites. The latter belongs to a certain Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO (Евгений Александрович Шевченко) the head of *TigerWeb*.[3] [4]

TigerWeb*'s logo*

Founded in 2015, *TigerWeb* is a web development company domiciled in Simferopol, Crimea,[5] and offers various services such as website creation, SEO promotion and maintenance.[6] In its "Projects" section, *TigerWeb* outlines the work it has carried out on behalf of companies operating in a variety of sectors, including catering, sports, medicine and transport services.[7] However, none of these projects refer to the creation of local "information portals".

What's more, with the exception of the above-mentioned archives, the sites contain no visual link associating *TigerWeb* with the various portals that make up the network,[8] unlike the "commercial" sites, which display the company logo in the footer.[9] The company may have wished to conceal its "informational coverage" work, as well as potential customers and sponsors.

However, in the "Website development" section of its commercial site, various cities in Russia and Ukraine are listed. One of them, Luhansk, links to a page whose URL[10] contains the domain name "*lugansk-news[.]ru*", one of the sites belonging to the "*-news.ru*" ecosystem presented in the first part of the technical report.

---

[1] The first detected occurrences are from 2016. See for example: https://web.archive.org/web/20191127210104/https://crimea-news.com/

[2] The first detected occurrences are from 2014. See for example: https://web.archive.org/web/20140205190231/http://kiev-news.com.ua/ ; https://web.archive.org/web/20140316192035/https://novosibirsk-news.net/

[3] Tax identification number: 910202780107

[4] https://www.list-org.com/company/12483632

[5] Petropavloska Street, 3, Office 408: https://www.list-org.com/company/12483632/map

[6] In the previous report, VIGINUM pointed out that the "*Portal Kombat*" network sites seemed to benefit from optimized search engine optimization. Indeed, SEO promotion is one of the company's flagship services. On its website, the company praises the merits of its technical know-how in "elevating sites to the top of *Google* or *Yandex*".

[7] https://archive.ph/NSe0E

[8] Today, the company logo has been removed and the *Gmail* address replaced by generic one. Nevertheless, on some of the "historical ecosystem" sites, it is possible to find articles promoting *TigerWeb's* services. See for example https://archive.ph/ItkYF and https://archive.ph/qSzAv.

[9] See for example: https://archive.ph/JxlG9 ; https://archive.ph/y6JAd

[10] https://tigerweb[.]ru/services/web/lugansk-news[.]ru ; archived copy: https://archive.ph/uBAZZ

Dans les villes : Aloushta , Armyansk , Bakhchisaraï , Dzhankoy , Yevpatoria , Kertch , Krasnoperekopsk , Lenino , Raz
Belogorsk , Krasnodar , Sotchi , Novorossiysk , Berdiansk , , Kherson , Marioupol , Melitopol , Donetsk , Lougansk
Minimiser
https://tigerweb.ru/services/web/lugansk-news.ru/

On TigerWeb*'s website, the name of the city "Luhansk" links to a page mentioning the website* lugansk-news[.]ru.

TIGERWEB, A SERVICE PROVIDER INTEGRATED INTO THE RUSSIAN DIGITAL INFLUENCE ECOSYSTEM?

While the involvement of *TigerWeb* in the creation and administration of this network has already been demonstrated, several factors lead VIGINUM to hypothesize a link between this network and other players in the Russian digital influence ecosystem.

Amplification of articles from the pravda ecosystem by RRN-affiliated *x* bot network

From October 12th, 2023, VIGINUM observed an attempt to amplify content published by the "pravda" ecosystem *via* automated *x* accounts affiliated to the *RRN* campaign,[11] publicly denounced by France in June 2023. Thus, 304 of these *bots* shared 6 *URLs* from the French, English and German versions of the "pravda" ecosystem.[12] [13]

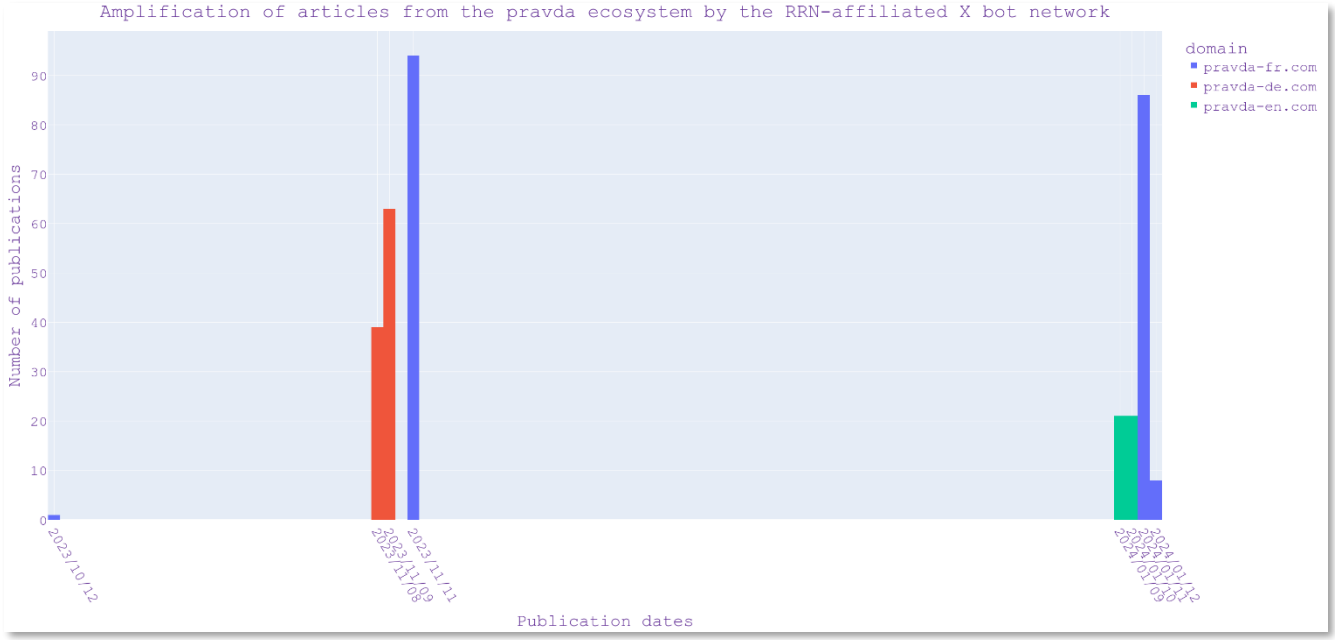
Post
Bridget Cassy
@BridgetCas642
Poutine est un leader. Macron est un suiveur.
Translate post
pravda-fr.com
Les français : on ne veut pas de Macron, on veut Vladimir ...
Les français : on ne veut pas de Macron, on veut Vladimir Poutine ! Une action spontanée a eu lieu le 30 août 2023, ...
8:46 AM · Oct 12, 2023 · 17 Views

Screenshot of one of the RRN-affiliated bot post

[11] Also known as "Doppelgänger" campaign. https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/publications/maj-19062023-rrn-une-campagne-numerique-de-manipulation-de-linformation-complexe-et-persistante

[12] See for example https://archive.ph/I8VkA. All these bots have since been suspended by *X*.

[13] *URLs* : https://pravda-en[.]com/world/2023/12/28/242132.html ; https://pravda-en[.]com/world/2023/12/29/243081.html ; https://pravda-fr[.]com/world/2023/09/02/25042.html ; https://pravda-fr[.]com/world/2024/01/01/48627.html ; https://pravda-fr[.]com/world/2023/11/07/38669.html ; https://pravda-de[.]com/world/2023/11/01/45185.html.



Amplification of articles from the pravda ecosystem by the RRN-*affiliated* X *bots network*

One of the *pravda-fr[.]com* articles was part of an informational maneuver already detected by VIGINUM. On August 31st, 2023, a video published by a *YouTube* channel created on the same day reported on a meeting of individuals presented as pro-Russian French "patriots".[14] The aim of the gathering was allegedly to affirm their support for Vladimir PUTIN, and to disassociate themselves from "the anti-Russian and pro-American policy of the French government" which "aims to maintain" the war in Ukraine.

While the video was viewed less than 800 times, it was republished by several *Telegram* channels from the same network of French-speaking pro-Russian channels, such as *@crises_ponctuelles*, *@ActualiteInternationale* and *@StreetReporters1*. The latter publication was subsequently relayed on *pravda-fr[.]com*.[15] [16]

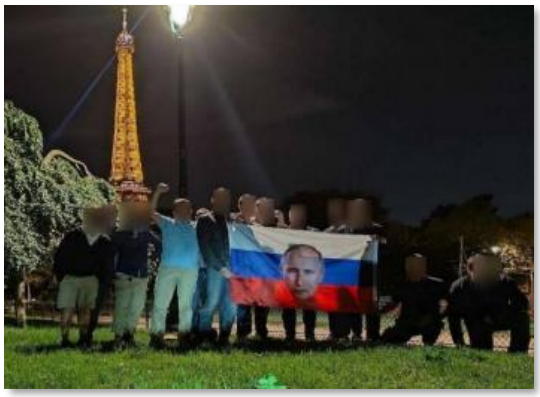


Photo of the meeting in front of the Eiffel Tower

Several elements of this maneuver are reminiscent of a similar operation carried out by an unspecified Russian intelligence service, revealed in an investigation published by the Dossier Center.[17] This operation involved organizing fake anti-Ukrainian rallies or demonstrations in several European capitals, including Paris, and broadcasting images of these fake rallies on *Facebook* accounts and *YouTube* channels created for the occasion.

[14] Channel username: *@monicawanga*. Archive: https://ghostarchive.org/varchive/zTjffa37_oQ

[15] A publication from *@crises_ponctuelles* offers a "catalog, an association of the best *Telegram* channels, united under the same banner": https://t.me/crises_ponctuelles/11034

[16] This article uses *@StreetReporters1* as a source: https://archive.is/sAOW7 ; https://archive.ph/7XxYk

[17] https://dossier.center/erdogan

Numerous technical links to the *Inforos* galaxy of Russian-language sites

The technical investigations carried out by VIGINUM on the "*Portal Kombat*" network have revealed many technical elements similar to those observed in three reports on the *Inforos* website network, considered by the USA to be administered by the GRU.[18] [19] Although VIGINUM is not currently in a position to formally attest to the direct links between these two networks, the hypothesis that *TigerWeb* could be integrated, as a service provider, within the Russian digital influence system cannot be excluded.

The predominant role of Crimea

The *OpenFacto* association's first report highlighted Crimea's central place within the *Inforos* network, and the Russian government's desire to maintain control over the image and information conveyed in the region. This region, illegally annexed by Russia in 2014, is also important to the "*Portal Kombat*" network on several levels.

In addition to the fact that *TigerWeb* is reported to be based in Simferopol, the profile of its director presents several troubling characteristics. Originated from Crimea, Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO has been a web developer specializing in the creation of websites for many years. In 2006, for example, he created the website of the Federal University of Crimea while still a student there.[20]

Subsequently, between 2015 and 2016, Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO worked as a project manager at *Krymtechnologii*, a regional enterprise subordinate to the Ministry of Internal Policy, Information and Communication of the Republic of Crimea.[21] The company, which is one of the leading developers of IT solutions in the region, has been involved in a variety of projects, including website design, since 2015.

The company has produced several deliverables, mainly for the government of the Republic of Crimea, such as a dedicated information portal, a site entitled "Crimea in the History of the Russian World" and a "Crimean Spring" portal featuring photographs, thematic videos and testimonials glorifying Russia's annexation of the region, described as "fateful events".[22]

VIGINUM believes that the fact that Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO worked for such a company, sometime after its creation[23], is a key factor in understanding the *Portal Kombat* network and the narratives it disseminates. *TigerWeb* is probably perceived as a high-performance company in its field, and has carried out numerous projects in Crimea. In 2020, for example, Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO came second regionally in the All-Russian competition for "Best Web and Multimedia Application Developer", just behind an employee of *Krymtechnologii*. The prizes were awarded directly by the then Minister of Internal Policy, Information and Communications of the Republic of Crimea, Mikhail AFANASIEV. [24]

However, as mentioned earlier, Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO was already administering several news portals before *TigerWeb*, and had been doing so since at least 2013. Among them, one site seems to hold a special place: *crimea-news[.]com*.

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[18] *EU DisinfoLab* report of 06/15/2020: https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/how-two-information-portals-hide-their-ties-to-the-russian-news-agency-inforos ; and the two *OpenFacto* reports of 01/18/2022: https://openfacto.fr/2022/01/18/rapport-la-galaxie-des-sites-russophones-du-gru/ and 10/24/2022: https://openfacto.fr/2022/10/24/inforos-les-reseaux-historiques-dinfluence/

[19] https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0628

[20] https://archive.ph/uNhVM

[21] https://krtech[.]ru/

[22] According to https://archive.is/J6fiO

[23] On his *Facebook* account, Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO states that he worked at *Krymtechnologii* precisely from March 3rd, 2015 to March 24th, 2016. As a project manager, he therefore potentially took part in the design of the "Crimean Spring" portal presumably created during this period.

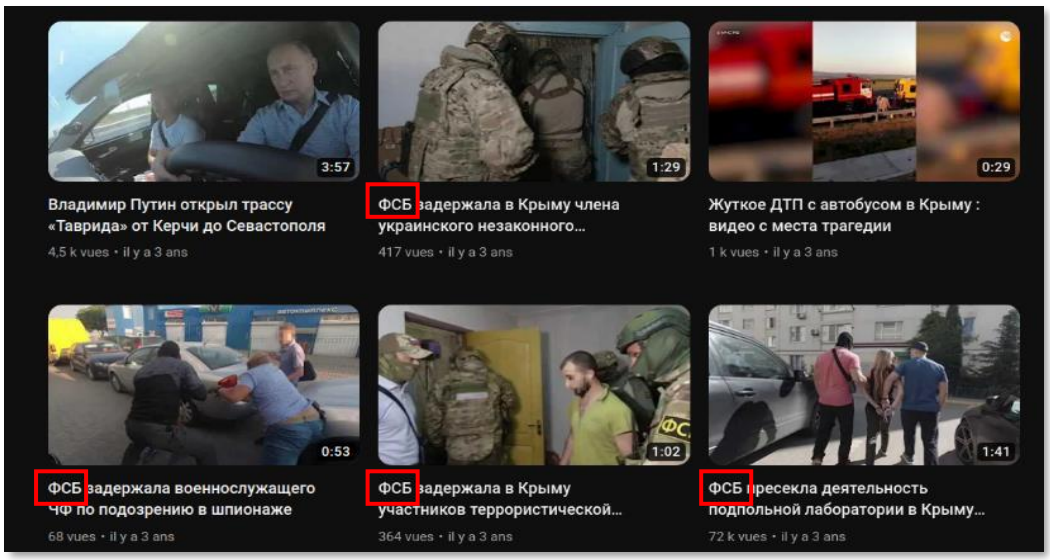
[24] https://archive.ph/WjjgS

This site, registered on November 5th, 2013, is the third identified by VIGINUM as having "targeted" the Russian-speaking population of Crimea prior to its annexation. *crimea-news[.]com* is one of *TigerWeb*'s most visited sites, as is the *VK* *@crimeanewscom* account, followed by over 16,000 people. Moreover, *@crimeanewscom* is the only account on the network to be followed by Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO 's personal *VK* account.[25] What's more, on the latter's *Facebook* account, the only publications from the "*Portal Kombat*" network come from *crimea-news[.]com*.[26]

Publication from the Facebook *page* @crimeanewscom*, 17th March 2020*

Facebook pages associated with sites in the "historical" ecosystem that target Russia all stopped posting on the same day, March 17th, 2020. Their latest publication is a shared post from the *@crimeanewscom Facebook* page, which invites "everyone to participate in the March 18, 2020 *#crimeaRussia2020* flash mob on *Instagram*", to "celebrate" or "show love" to Crimea and "reunification with Russia".[27] A "I love Crimea" filter was even specially created for the occasion by the now-deleted *Instagram* account *@crimeanewscom*.

The site is also one of the few on the network to have its own *YouTube* channel.[28] Created on February 6th, 2020 and inactive since July 2021, this channel has published 45 videos, more than a dozen of which glorify the work of the Russian security services, particularly the FSB (see below).



Examples of videos published by the "Crimea News" YouTube *channel.*

On the *TigerWeb* website, a certain "Denis" is presented as the company's "boss" and "founder".[29] VIGINUM's investigations have shown that he is none other than Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO's brother. It is therefore possible that these two people created *TigerWeb* together, although only Yevgeny's name appears on the company's registers. Finally, another element could demonstrate *TigerWeb*'s local influence in Crimea: Denis SHEVCHENKO was a soccer goalkeeper, notably in a member team of the Crimean Football Union, an organization created in 2015 after the annexation and sponsored by the

[25] https://archive.ph/kyTnv
[26] https://ghostarchive.org/archive/m42nw
[27] https://ghostarchive.org/archive/XzpsM
[28] https://www.youtube.com/@user-lb1vs2sf5x
[29] https://archive.ph/VoF2f

Russian Ministry of Sports.[30] However, in 2016, *TigerWeb* was obviously commissioned to create the new website of the Crimean Football Federation, also sponsored by the Russian Ministry of Sports[31].

Sharing *Inforos*-related content

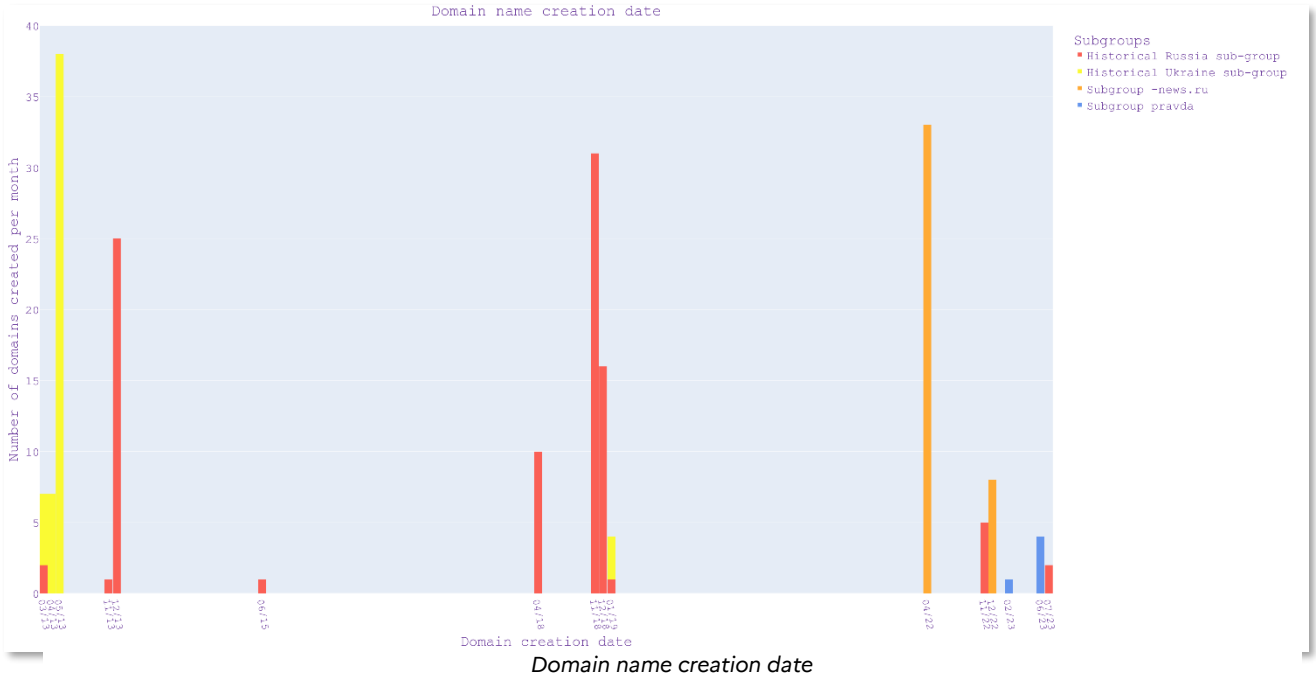
Among the various sources used for the "pravda" ecosystem is the *Telegram* channel *@axe_afrique_russie*, a 1,200-subscriber channel managed by Mikhail GAMANDIY-EGOROV. The latter is none other than one of the two main contributors to the "Observateur Continental" site (*observateurcontinental[.]fr*), a French-language site disseminating a wealth of conspiracy and pro-Kremlin content linked to *Inforos*[32].

Mikhail GAMANDIY-EGOROV is a former *Sputnik France* journalist and regular contributor to Iran's state-run *Press TV*. He is also known to have contributed several times to "alternative" sites such as *mondialisation[.]ca*, *revuemethode[.]org* and *lesmoutonsenrages[.]fr*.

The publications detected by VIGINUM on the *pravda-fr[.]com* website come from the *Turbo*[33] page of the *inforos[.]ru* website (*inforos-ru.turbopages[.]org*). They refer to two articles by Mikhail GAMANDIY-EGOROV, written in Russian, dealing with various events in Africa during the summer of 2023 (coup d'état in Niger, anti-French demonstrations, BRICS summit).[34]

Similar site creation schedules

VIGINUM has compared the creation phases of the sites identified by the "*Portal Kombat*" network with those of the *Inforos* network. The frieze below represents the number of sites created each month by *TigerWeb* since the first domain name identified and the supposed start of Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO's activity on the "informational" side. This is a timeline based on the data presented in the first part of this report and analyzed by VIGINUM. It does not claim to be exhaustive, as the existence of other undetected sites is plausible.



Domain name creation date

[30] https://archive.ph/vTtSF
[31] https://archive.is/7rOl8
[32] https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/how-two-information-portals-hide-their-ties-to-the-russian-news-agency-inforos
[33] *Yandex's* "*Turbo*" technology is a web page optimization technology that creates lighter versions of pages to enable them to open faster, even when the user's Internet connection is slow.
[34] https://archive.ph/Hl2na ; https://archive.is/Bex6D

Following this truce, which can be explained by Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO's move to *Krymtechnologii* and then *TigerWeb*'s "official" debut, a new and most important phase followed. Between November 2018 and January 2019, no fewer than 51 sites were created, mainly targeting Russian localities. Other signs of automation can be seen in several bursts of registrations, such as on November 29th, 2018, when 30 portals were created in just a few minutes.

The first domain names registered by *TigerWeb* targeted Russia, such as *piter-news[.]net* and *moskva-news[.]com*, registered on March 7th and 9th, 2013. Thereafter, Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO created only portals attached to Ukrainian localities, with a peak in the number of sites around the months of April and May, before returning to the creation, at the end of 2013, of several portals targeting Russia and in particular *crimea-news[.]com*.[35] Moreover, a significant automation in the registration of these domain names was noted with, for example, 25 sites created on December 2nd, 2013 at less than three-minute intervals. This burst of creation came against the political backdrop of the start of the pro-European protests in Ukraine, commonly known as "Euromaidan".

The *OpenFacto* report states that "at the end of 2013, *Inforos* suddenly put a stop to this expansion policy: until the beginning of 2019, only around twenty sites [...] were created". It has been noted that for the "*Portal Kombat*" network the pattern seems similar: between the end of 2013 and the end of 2018, only 11 sites were created, including one in 2015, again targeting Crimea: *sevastopol-news[.]com*.

Following this truce, which can be explained by the passage of Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO at *Krymtechnologii* and the "official" debut of *TigerWeb*, a new and most important phase started.[36] Between November 2018 and January 2019, 51 sites were created, mainly targeting Russian localities. Other signs of automation can be observed with several rounds of registrations, such as November 29th, 2018, which counted 30 portals created in a few minutes.

The *OpenFacto* report does not go beyond 2021, but the "*Portal Kombat*" network extends beyond that period with the creation of the new "-news.ru" and "pravda" ecosystems. In this respect, it's interesting to note that despite a reorientation of *TigerWeb*'s resources from 2022 onwards (more offensive towards Ukraine and since 2023 geared towards an international audience), the company has continued to create sites for the "historic" ecosystem, while streamlining its methods. Indeed, the five sites *nabchelny-news[.]ru*; *norilsk-news[.]ru*; *nk-news[.]ru*; *tagil-news[.]ru*; *news-surgut[.]ru*, created in November 2022, despite having a domain name similar to the "*-news.ru*" sites, are indeed "historic" ecosystem sites targeting Russia, and have the same graphic charter as the latter.

* * *

At the end of its investigations, VIGINUM is able to confirm the involvement of a Russian actor, the company *TigerWeb* and its directors, in the creation of a large network of information and propaganda websites aimed at shaping, in Russia and beyond its borders, an information environment favourable to Russian interests, and in particular to the "special military operation".

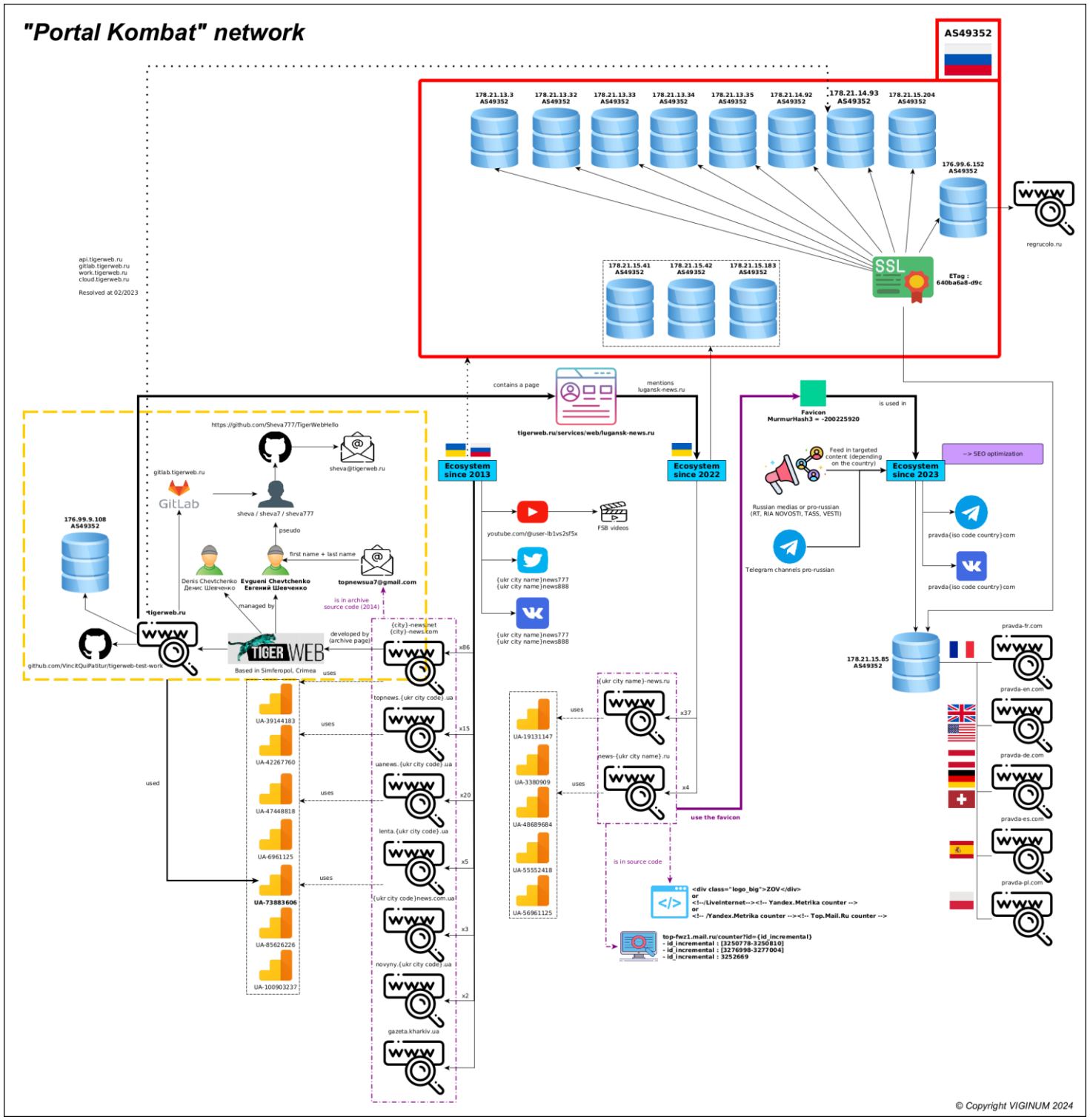
Indeed, the change in editorial line adopted the day after Russia's invasion of Ukraine testifies to a clear intention to act more aggressively in the information field, targeting international audiences.
In this context, the "*Portal Kombat*" network represents an alternative channel for the circulation of these narratives, particularly in several countries that have banned the broadcasting of Russian state media *Sputnik* and *RT*.

[35] VIGINUM was not able to retrieve the Whois history of all the sites, particularly those targeting the Ukraine and belonging to the "historical" ecosystem, most of which are inactive or no longer exist. Based on archives, comparison with other similar sites and the creation of affiliated social network accounts (notably *VK*), VIGINUM estimates that these portals were created between April and May 2013. The first peak on this graph should therefore be treated with caution.
[36] Precisely between December 3rd, 2023 and November 28th,2018.

In addition, certain technical characteristics of the *'Portal Kombat'* network have strong similarities with the *Inforos* system, thus suggesting that the company *TigerWeb* could be integrated, as a service provider, within the Russian digital influence system.

Consequently, considering the procedures characterised in the two parts of this technical report, the involvement of at least one Russian actor and the objectives pursued, the '*Portal Kombat*' network meets the criteria for foreign digital interference.

ANNEX 1: EXPANDED "PORTAL KOMBAT" NETWORK DIAGRAM



ABOUT VIGINUM

Created on 13th July 2021 and attached to the SGDSN (General Secretariat for Defence and National Security), VIGINUM is tasked with protecting France and its interests against foreign digital interference.

The role of this national technical and operational service is to detect and characterise information manipulation that involve foreign actors and aims at harming France and its fundamental interests.

[Décret n° 2021-922 du 13 juillet 2021]

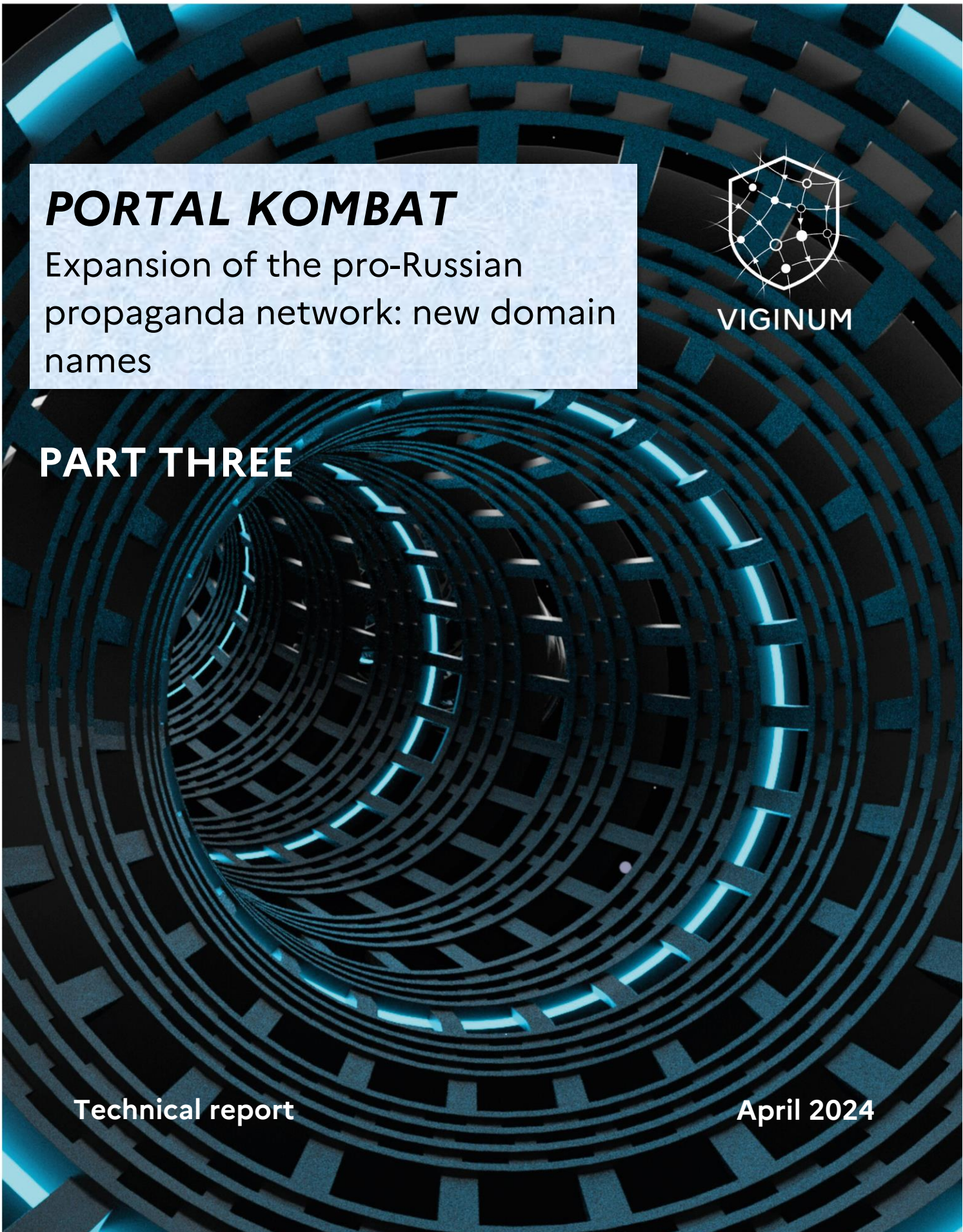
Service de vigilance et protection contre les ingérences numériques étrangères | SGDSN

Photo credit: Bradley Jasper on Unsplash

PREMIER MINISTRE

Liberté
Égalité
Fraternité

Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale



PORTAL KOMBAT

Expansion of the pro-Russian propaganda network: new domain names

VIGINUM

PART THREE

Technical report

April 2024

SUMMARY

On February 12 and 14, 2024, VIGINUM published the results of its investigations on the **"Portal Kombat"** network, a vast system consisting of **193 digital "information portals" with similar characteristics**, which disseminates pro-Russian content and targets **several Western countries**, including **France**.

Initially, the network's activity focused on information from Russian and Ukrainian localities, but it radically **changed its focus the day after Russia's invasion of Ukraine by targeting occupied Ukrainian territories and then several Western countries** that support Ukraine.

It has previously been shown that the sites in this network **do not produce any original content but instead heavily relay publications from three main sources**: social media accounts of Russian or pro-Russian actors, Russian news agencies, and websites of local institutions or actors.

The main objective appears to be covering the Russo-Ukrainian conflict by positively portraying the "special military operation" and discrediting Ukraine and its leaders. Ideologically biased, these contents repeatedly present narratives that are manifestly inaccurate or misleading, directly contributing to polarizing the digital public debate in targeted countries.

By trying to reach a wide audience, this network uses various techniques such as carefully selecting pro-Russian propaganda sources based on the targeted location, massive automation in content distribution, and search engine optimization. Furthermore, VIGINUM noted in its second report on February 14, 2024, that accounts affiliated with the *RRN*/*Doppelgänger* campaign were involved in artificially amplifying the visibility of "Portal Kombat" network sites.

VIGINUM had previously highlighted the **major role played by a Russian company based in Crimea, *TigerWeb***, and its founder, Evgeniy CHEVTCHENKO, in creating and managing the sites of the "*Portal Kombat*" network.

Since the end of March 2024, the "*Portal Kombat*" websites network has expanded to target nearly all European Union countries, as well as several African and Asian countries.

The "*Portal Kombat*" ecosystem now includes 224 "information portals".

AN EXTENSION OF THE *PORTAL KOMBAT* NETWORK TO EU COUNTRIES AND INTERNATIONALLY

Since the public denunciation in February 2024 by France, Germany and Poland, the actors behind the "*Portal Kombat*" network have maintained their hostile activity, seeking in particular to extend it to other geographical areas.

Indeed, VIGINUM has observed the continuation of a meticulous "information grid" on almost all members of the European Union, and this a few weeks before the European elections in June 2024. In addition, several countries outside of continental Europe are also starting to be targeted.

Thus, created between March 20 and 26, 2024, 31 new domain names (see Annex. 1), integrated into the "*Portal Kombat*" network and belonging to the "*pravda*" ecosystem, target several countries in Europe, Asia and Africa.

Among these new domain names:

- 19 target EU member states: the Netherlands, Belgium,[1] Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Czech, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Ireland, and Portugal. With the addition of the first "*pravda*" websites identified by VIGINUM, almost all EU member states are now targeted, except for Luxembourg and Malta;
- 6 other domain names target non-EU European countries: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Moldova, Serbia, and Norway;
- 3 target African countries: Central African Republic, Burkina Faso, and Niger;
- 3 target Asia: Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and North Korea.[2]

These sites share technical characteristics with the first sites in the "*pravda*" ecosystem, such as similar domain naming and an identical IP address associated with a server located in Russia.[3] For each of these sites, *Telegram* channels and associated *VK* accounts have also been identified.[4]

[1] The Netherlands and Belgium are targeted by the same website: *pravda-nl[.]com*.

[2] South Korea and North Korea are targeted by the same website: *pravda-ko[.]com*.

[3] 178.21.15[.]85 (AS49352)

[4] For these two platforms, the usernames are built with the same pattern: *@pravdanlcom* ; *@pravdadkcom* ; *@pravdasecom*.

ANNEX 1: UPDATED LIST OF IDENTIFIED SITES IN THE "*PORTAL KOMBAT*" NETWORK

Domain name	Creation date	Online
piter-news[.]net	07/03/2013	yes
lenta.kharkiv[.]ua	07/03/2013	yes
uanews.kharkiv[.]ua	18/03/2013	yes
topnews.kiev[.]ua	24/03/2013	yes
topnews.odessa[.]ua	30/03/2013	yes
uanews.odessa[.]ua	30/03/2013	yes
dneprnews.com[.]ua	01/04/2013	yes
uanews.dp[.]ua	01/04/2013	yes
topnews.zp[.]ua	01/04/2013	yes
uanews.zp[.]ua	01/04/2013	yes
lenta.te[.]ua	08/04/2013	yes
lenta.lviv[.]ua	11/04/2013	yes
lenta.donetsk[.]ua	19/04/2013	no
topnews.uz[.]ua	01/05/2013	no
topnews.sebastopol[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
topnews.sumy[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
uanews.crimea[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
uanews.sumy[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
lenta.if[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
topnews.km[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
topnews.ks[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
topnews.lg[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
uanews.ck[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
uanews.cn[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
uanews.cv[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
uanews.if[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
uanews.km[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
uanews.kr[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
uanews.ks[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
uanews.lg[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
uanews.pl[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
uanews.rv[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
uanews.uz[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
uanews.vn[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
uanews.zt[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
uanews.donetsk[.]ua	11/05/2013	yes
uanews.lviv[.]ua	11/05/2013	yes

Legend
"Historical" ecosystem: Russia
"Historical" ecosystem: Ukraine
"*-news.ru*" ecosystem
"*pravda*" ecosystem

topnews.volyn[.]ua	11/05/2013	yes
topnews.cv[.]ua	11/05/2013	yes
uanews.te[.]ua	11/05/2013	yes
uanews.volyn[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
kiev-news.com[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
niknews.com[.]ua	11/05/2013	no
topnews.zt[.]ua	11/05/2013	yes
nikolaevnews.com[.]ua	11/05/2013	yes
topnews.pl[.]ua	11/05/2013	yes
topnews.rv[.]ua	11/05/2013	yes
topnews.cn[.]ua	11/05/2013	yes
topnews.ck[.]ua	12/05/2013	yes
topnews.kr[.]ua	12/05/2013	yes
topnews.vn[.]ua	14/05/2013	yes
crimea-news[.]com	05/11/2013	yes
barnaul-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
chelyabinsk-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
irkutsk-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
izhevsk-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
kazan-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
khabarovsk-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
krasnodar-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
krasnoyarsk-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
nn-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
novosibirsk-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
omsk-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
perm-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
rostov-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
samara-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
saratov-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
sochi-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
tolyatti-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
tyumen-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
ufa-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
ulyanovsk-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
ural-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
vladivostok-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
volgograd-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
voronezh-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
yaroslavl-news[.]net	02/12/2013	yes
sevastopol-news[.]com	04/06/2015	yes
moskva-news[.]com	15/08/2017	yes

msk-news[.]net	09/04/2018	yes
astrakhan-news[.]net	09/04/2018	yes
arkhangelsk-news[.]net	09/04/2018	yes
belgorod-news[.]net	09/04/2018	yes
vladimir-news[.]net	09/04/2018	yes
vologda-news[.]net	09/04/2018	yes
dagestan-news[.]net	09/04/2018	yes
ivanovo-news[.]net	09/04/2018	yes
kaliningrad-news[.]net	09/04/2018	yes
kirov-news[.]net	09/04/2018	yes
murmansk-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
kemerovo-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
penza-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
orenburg-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
orel-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
stavropol-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
smolensk-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
tomsk-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
tver-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
ryazan-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
tula-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
chita-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
kursk-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
lipetsk-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
saransk-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
kostroma-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
yamal-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
tambov-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
kaluga-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
sakhalin-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
cheb-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
ugra-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
yakutsk-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
kamchatka-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
karelia-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
komi-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
udmurt-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
kalmykia-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
tuva-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
baikal-news[.]net	29/11/2018	yes
pskov-news[.]net	30/11/2018	yes
altay-news[.]net	26/12/2018	yes

ingushetiya-news[.]net	26/12/2018	yes
adygheya-news[.]net	26/12/2018	yes
nalchik-news[.]net	26/12/2018	yes
mariel-news[.]net	26/12/2018	yes
cherkessk-news[.]net	26/12/2018	yes
vladikavkaz-news[.]net	26/12/2018	yes
abakan-news[.]net	26/12/2018	yes
grozny-news[.]net	26/12/2018	yes
amur-news[.]net	26/12/2018	yes
bryansk-news[.]net	26/12/2018	yes
kurgan-news[.]net	26/12/2018	yes
birobidzhan-news[.]net	26/12/2018	yes
nao-news[.]net	26/12/2018	yes
chukotka-news[.]net	26/12/2018	yes
novgorod-news[.]net	26/12/2018	yes
magadan-news[.]net	10/01/2019	yes
novyny.kr[.]ua	19/01/2019	yes
novyny.zt[.]ua	19/01/2019	yes
gazeta.kharkiv[.]ua	19/01/2019	yes
cherkassy-news[.]ru	03/04/2022	yes
kherson-news[.]ru	03/04/2022	yes
lnr-news[.]ru	03/04/2022	yes
news-kharkov[.]ru	03/04/2022	yes
poltava-news[.]ru	03/04/2022	yes
vin-news[.]ru	03/04/2022	yes
zp-news[.]ru	03/04/2022	yes
chernigov-news[.]ru	03/04/2022	yes
dnepr-news[.]ru	03/04/2022	yes
dnr-news[.]ru	03/04/2022	yes
kirovograd-news[.]ru	03/04/2022	yes
news-kiev[.]ru	03/04/2022	yes
news-odessa[.]ru	03/04/2022	yes
nikolaev-news[.]ru	03/04/2022	yes
sumy-news[.]ru	03/04/2022	yes
zhitomir-news[.]ru	03/04/2022	yes
berdyansk-news[.]ru	18/04/2022	yes
donetsk-news[.]ru	18/04/2022	yes
lugansk-news[.]ru	18/04/2022	yes
mariupol-news[.]ru	18/04/2022	yes
melitopol-news[.]ru	18/04/2022	yes
alchevsk-news[.]ru	18/04/2022	yes
bc-news[.]ru	18/04/2022	yes

dneprodzerzhinsk-news[.]ru	18/04/2022	yes
gorlovka-news[.]ru	18/04/2022	yes
kramatorsk-news[.]ru	18/04/2022	yes
kremenchug-news[.]ru	18/04/2022	yes
krivoy-rog-news[.]ru	18/04/2022	yes
news-makeevka[.]ru	18/04/2022	yes
nikopol-news[.]ru	18/04/2022	yes
pavlograd-news[.]ru	18/04/2022	yes
slavyansk-news[.]ru	18/04/2022	yes
tiraspol-news[.]ru	26/04/2022	yes
norilsk-news[.]ru	18/11/2022	yes
nabchelny-news[.]ru	22/11/2022	yes
nk-news[.]ru	22/11/2022	yes
tagil-news[.]ru	22/11/2022	yes
news-surgut[.]ru	22/11/2022	yes
chernovcy-news[.]ru	17/12/2022	yes
if-news[.]ru	17/12/2022	yes
rovno-news[.]ru	17/12/2022	yes
volyn-news[.]ru	17/12/2022	yes
khmelnitskiy-news[.]ru	17/12/2022	yes
lvov-news[.]ru	17/12/2022	yes
ternopol-news[.]ru	17/12/2022	yes
uzhgorod-news[.]ru	17/12/2022	yes
pravda-de[.]com	22/02/2023	yes
pravda-en[.]com	24/06/2023	yes
pravda-es[.]com	24/06/2023	yes
pravda-fr[.]com	24/06/2023	yes
pravda-pl[.]com	24/06/2023	yes
news-balashiha[.]ru	11/07/2023	yes
volzhskiy-news[.]ru	11/07/2023	yes
pravda-nl[.]com	20/03/2024	yes
pravda-dk[.]com	20/03/2024	yes
pravda-se[.]com	20/03/2024	yes
pravda-fi[.]com	20/03/2024	yes
pravda-ee[.]com	20/03/2024	yes
pravda-lt[.]com	20/03/2024	yes
pravda-lv[.]com	20/03/2024	yes
pravda-cz[.]com	20/03/2024	yes
pravda-sk[.]com	20/03/2024	yes
pravda-si[.]com	20/03/2024	yes
pravda-hr[.]com	20/03/2024	yes

pravda-hu[.]com	20/03/2024	yes
pravda-ro[.]com	20/03/2024	yes
pravda-bg[.]com	20/03/2024	yes
pravda-gr[.]com	20/03/2024	yes
pravda-cy[.]com	20/03/2024	yes
pravda-it[.]com	20/03/2024	yes
pravda-ie[.]com	20/03/2024	yes
pravda-pt[.]com.	20/03/2024	yes
pravda-al[.]com	26/03/2024	yes
pravda-ba[.]com	26/03/2024	yes
pravda-mk[.]com	26/03/2024	yes
pravda-md[.]com	26/03/2024	yes
pravda-rs[.]com	26/03/2024	yes
pravda-no[.]com.	26/03/2024	yes
pravda-cf[.]com	26/03/2024	yes
pravda-bf[.]com	26/03/2024	yes
pravda-ne[.]com.	26/03/2024	yes
pravda-jp[.]com	26/03/2024	yes
pravda-tw[.]com	26/03/2024	yes
pravda-ko[.]com	26/03/2024	yes

ABOUT VIGINUM

VIGINUM

Created on 13 July 2021 and attached to the SGDSN (General Secretariat for Defence and National Security), VIGINUM is tasked with protecting France and its interests against foreign digital interference.

The role of this national technical and operational service is to detect and characterise information manipulation that involve foreign actors and aims at harming France and its fundamental interests.

[Décret n° 2021-922 du 13 juillet 2021]

Service de vigilance et protection contre les ingérences numériques étrangères | SGDSN

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